

EVERY SMILE
HAS A SECRET.
EVERY LIE
HAS A PRICE.



HER PERFECT LIES

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER OF
LOVE, DECEPTION AND BETRAYAL

OLAJIDE A. SMITH

HER PERFECT LIES

A Psychological Thriller of Love,
Deception and Betrayal

Olajide A. Smith

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EBOOK ISBN: 9781806455782

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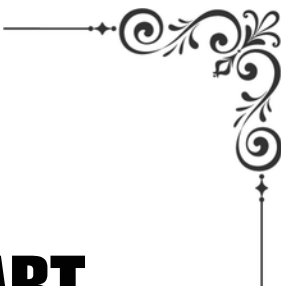
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FEARLESS HEART



After giving himself a final once-over, Zubby felt confident in his appearance and decided he was ready to head out. Of all the outfits he owned, none seemed more fitting for his rendezvous with Shell Oil than the navy-blue suit, crisp white shirt and black wingtips polished to a mirror shine. Fully aware of the power of a first impression, he paid meticulous attention to every detail.

A two-year stint in a warehouse after graduating from university wasn't the life Zubby had envisioned for himself at 25. As far as he was concerned, he was a master strategist. No way was he about to let life catch him off-guard. Therefore, he planned.

The habit of planning ahead had been ingrained in him since childhood, so he meticulously planned every aspect of his life, approaching it like a skilled architect. He took control and designed the life he believed he was meant to live.

So, why was he working in a warehouse two hours from home? The Nigerian job market was brutally tight and relentlessly competitive—there was no denying that. Still, graduating with a Second-Class Upper degree in Economics should have given him some kind of edge. Instead, it felt almost meaningless, with the way people constantly droned in his ear about how it 'didn't matter.'

There was something uniquely exhausting about being Nigerian; it often seemed as though the country was determined to push him ten steps backward for every step forward he managed to take.

Gazing into the mirror, he drew a deep breath, allowing for a fleeting moment of introspection. His deep, dark brown eyes held an enigmatic depth, suggesting a reservoir of resilience and inner strength.

As usual, his expression remained steadfast and straight, a demeanor often criticized for its unyielding seriousness.



It was unfortunate that Zubby was constantly at odds with the system. Everyone who knew him recognized the enduring spark of hope he carried within. Despite the mounting bills, the struggle to find work worthy of his qualifications, and the daily frustrations of life in Lagos, he still woke each morning with a sense of purpose and determination coursing through his veins.

He was determined to push back with everything he had. He was driven by the need to hustle, grind and keep moving forward. No matter how many setbacks life threw his way, an unwavering flame of hope burned within him—a stubborn optimism that refused to die.

Heaving a sigh, Zubby tugged at his left lapel, ensuring every detail of his appearance was in place. A briefcase hung at his side, loaded with the tools for the battle that lay ahead—a neatly prepared CV, an interview letter, and professional references from lecturers and former employers. Documents that could, if all went well, alter the course of his life.

Slowly and carefully, he closed the creaking door behind him, easing it shut until the latch clicked softly into place. He didn't want to disturb his housemate, Chidi, who still had an hour of sleep before he needed to wake up.

Dawn was close to breaking when Zubby stepped outside, with hues of orange, blue, pink, purple, and red painting the sky in a symphony of colors. There wasn't even a breath of wind on the calm Tuesday morning in May. Despite his interview being at 10:00, Zubby knew not to wait until dawn to set out considering Lagos' notorious traffic congestion.

A comedian once said most Lagosians would miss God's trumpet call because they would be stuck in traffic. As he remembered the joke, the thought made Zubby chuckle under his breath, even though some uptight Christians hadn't found the joke funny. People really needed to lighten up, he thought. It seemed like people had forgotten how to laugh, and every harmless joke today was taken as offensive.

Outside the gate, the Uber he had booked the previous day was already waiting for him. 'Right on time,' he muttered to himself. 'Good morning, and thank you for arriving on time,' he said to the driver.

'Good morning sir,' the driver replied cheerfully.

Zubby settled into the back seat and began rehearsing the elevator pitch he had painstakingly crafted. He had spent the past few days preparing for the interview with almost obsessive attention to detail, determined to leave as little as possible to chance.

He had researched the hiring manager extensively, uncovering valuable insights into her personality, interests and opinions. Her Twitter feed, in particular, had offered revealing glimpses into the woman behind the professional façade. Zubby intended to use

what he had learned to steer the conversation beyond predictable questions and rehearsed answers—and, in the process, leave a lasting impression. He sighed: *You can do this, Zubby. You can.*

Taking out his phone, he began to scroll through it looking for news that might be of interest.

Suddenly, he paused:



Nigerian Chess Team Beats China to Become World Champions!

Almost unconsciously, a smile began to spread on his lips, and warmth bloomed in his chest. Tapping the link, he read the full story and again smiled. It was a moment of pride, a reminder of the indomitable spirit that defined Nigerians. This was what they embodied: personality, grit, and resilience.

As the Uber whisked him through the waking streets of Lagos Mainland, Zubby sat back and watched the city come alive. Commuters hurried along crowded streets, traders arranged their wares, and buses honked impatiently as the morning unfolded around them. He found himself wondering about the lives of the people he passed. Every morning, they stepped into the chaos with

remarkable grit and resilience, determined to carve out a living—and, somehow, a measure of dignity and meaning—from circumstances that often seemed determined to deny them both.

Life in Nigeria was rarely easy. Yet millions faced its challenges every day—adapting, enduring, and finding the strength to keep moving forward.



JUST OVER AN hour and fifteen minutes later, Zubby emerged from the air-conditioned Uber and instantly felt the searing heat of the scorching sun on his skin.

He glanced at his watch: 7:44. Shell Oil was only a short walk away, yet his interview wasn't until 10:00. He had more than enough time to spare before making his way into the building. He planned to manage his time by hanging out at a local café he'd discovered when he scouted out the area a couple of days ago.

As he made his way along the broad sidewalks of Lekki's business district, he walked with quiet purpose, the polished leather briefcase swinging gently at his side. Office workers streamed past him in every direction, some deep in conversation, others hurrying to meetings or waiting for ride-hailing cars. The morning air carried a blend of freshly brewed coffee, traffic fumes, and the salty breeze drifting in from the Atlantic.

Though his heart beat a little faster with every step toward the interview, his posture remained upright and composed. Today wasn't about fear—it was about opportunity. After everything he'd endured, this was his chance to begin again.



He decided to cut through the Lekki shopping mall car park on his way to the café, a shortcut that would shave a few minutes off the journey. It was a welcome trade-off. Walking through Lagos in a tailored suit beneath the relentless afternoon sun was punishing, the heat clinging to him like a second skin.

As he crossed the car park, he was struck by how unusually quiet it was. Only one corner showed any sign of life—a young couple embroiled in a fierce argument beside a gleaming yellow Lamborghini Aventador. The man's bright yellow tracksuit was almost the exact shade of the supercar, as though he'd deliberately dressed to match his own ego. In one hand, he held a walking stick topped with a polished gold handle, catching the light each time he shifted his grip.

He vented his rage towards his companion—a petite woman in a neat navy-blue suit that sharpened her professional air. She was small, contained, polished. There was no visible connection between them, no shared rhythm. Zubby couldn't imagine how they had ended up together—they looked like they belonged to entirely different worlds.



Zubby felt heat bloom in his chest.

His jaw tightened.

Something in the way she avoided eye contact, the way her weight shifted subtly away from the man sent a cold knot through his stomach.

His instincts stirred. Whatever story was playing out here, he knew it wasn't going to end well unless someone stepped in.

The situation escalated in seconds.

The man's shouting exploded into violence—a brutal punch to the girl's stomach, followed by a slap that echoed across the empty car park with a sickening resonance.

The sound ripped straight through Zubby.

For a split second, he was ten years old again—frozen, helpless, listening to fists meet flesh.

Instinct took over. His body moved first—he was already running. His shoes slapped against the concrete, breath tearing from his lungs as he closed the distance.

The girl staggered back, folding over with a strangled cry. The man surged after her, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and yanked her upright, his other hand coming down again and again.

She raised her arms, shaking, trying to shield her face. It didn't help. Tears streamed freely now, her sobs echoing off the walls of the deserted car park.

Zubby felt heat rush through his veins. His jaw clenched so hard it hurt. He reached them just as the man drew back for another strike. Zubby caught his wrist mid-swing and twisted hard, forcing him away. The girl crumbled to the ground; her body wracked with sobs. Zubby's body was still buzzing, adrenaline roaring through him.

He stepped between the man and the girl, planting his feet instinctively and squaring his shoulders. Facing the attacker, he held his gaze without flinching. 'What the hell is wrong with you, man?' he said. You can't do that to a woman. What the fuck's your problem?'

Sparks exploded from the man's eyes as he raged.

'Are you crazy? How dare you lay your filthy hands on me and tell me how to deal with my woman! Do you know who you're fucking with?'

‘I don’t give a damn who the fuck you are. You don’t put your hands on a woman like that.’

‘Fuck you,’ the man snarled, his voice quavering with rage. With explosive force, he lunged violently at Zubby, intending to hit him. However, Zubby was too fast and strong for him. Evading the incoming punch with a dancer’s grace, he effortlessly pushed the man away with a controlled force.

The man stumbled backward, tripped over his feet and collapsed onto the concrete. Zubby redirected his attention to the young lady. Seated on the ground, her face obscured by disheveled locks, the young lady bore the aftermath of the traumatic encounter.

Zubby gracefully squatted in front of her, attempting to comfort her.



‘Are you alright?’

She was still crying, and didn’t look up at him. It was evident from her sobs that she had been badly hurt.

When Zubby heard footsteps shuffle behind him, he quickly looked back to see the man poised to hit him with his walking stick.

In an instant, Zubby sprang to his feet—his left hand seizing the man’s right arm mid-strike as his right fist slammed into his jaw.

A brief dance ensued as the man teetered on the edge of equilibrium, his body swaying with a vulnerable uncertainty as he tried to maintain his balance. Upon steadying himself, he gingerly felt his lip and realized it was bleeding from a cut.

With a dark scowl on his face, he growled: ‘Oh, you’ve messed with the wrong man, motherfucker.’

‘Man? I don’t see a man. All I see is a coward who thinks he can brutalize women and get away with it.’

The man’s jaw tightened. He jabbed his walking stick toward Zubby, each thrust punctuating his words. ‘I’m going to teach you a lesson you will never forget in your miserable life.’



Angrily pulling out his phone from his pocket, the man turned his back on Zubby. He dialed a number, waited for it to ring, and then yelled into it as soon as the person answered:

‘Ice! Where are you? Where’s Doom?’

‘We’re still at Mama Calabar. We’ve just finished eating.’

‘Good. Some punk just attacked me.’

‘Attacked you keh?’

‘Can you believe that shit?’

‘Where are you right now, sir?’

‘Lekki Mall. Parking lot.’

‘We’ll be there in less than five minutes!’

Having ended the call, the man’s menacing declaration sliced through the air like a blade.

‘I’m going to fuckin’ deal with you today,’ he snarled, punctuating the threat with a vicious jab of his walking stick aimed squarely at Zubby.

Zubby heard the woman make a distressed sound and immediately rushed to her side.

‘Hey, are you okay?’ he asked.

She had managed to struggle to her feet. Slowly, she lifted her tear-streaked face and looked up at him.

The instant their eyes met, Zubby’s heart skipped a beat. It was the first time he had seen her face properly, and despite her dishevelled appearance, the tears cascading down her bruised cheeks and the unmistakable signs of the brutal assault she had just endured, he was struck by her beauty.

There was something hauntingly captivating about her vulnerability. The fear and fragility etched across her face seemed, paradoxically, to make her even more beautiful—not in spite of the pain she was enduring, but because beneath it, Zubby could see a quiet strength that moved him.

For a fleeting moment, everything around him seemed to fade. He felt an inexplicable pull toward her, accompanied by a powerful instinct to protect her from whatever danger came next—even if

doing so meant putting himself directly in harm's way.

He didn't know her. Yet something inside him had already decided that he could not leave her to face the danger alone.

With a trembling voice and fear flickering in her eyes, she pleaded, 'Please, you need to leave. Right now.' She was still bent over in pain and gasping for breath, but somehow she had found her voice. 'This man is dangerous,' she gasped. 'Please... just go.'

A short distance away, the man prowled up and down the car park, his movements slow and deliberate. Every few seconds, he glanced towards the entrance, waiting for the people he had summoned.

'There's no way I'm leaving you alone with this guy,' Zubby said firmly. 'I need to get you to a hospital—.'

'No!'

The desperation in her voice stopped him. 'You don't understand,' she said, shaking her head vigorously. 'I'll be fine. Just go before it's too late.'

'I'm not going anywhere.'

'Please!' she begged. 'I appreciate what you did for me, but you have to go now. If you stay, they'll hurt you.'

Zubby gave her a reassuring smile.

'Let them come.'

She stared at him in disbelief. 'You think this is a joke?'

'No.'

'Then why won't you leave?'

His expression hardened as he glanced towards Jim. 'Because I'm not going to leave you at the mercy of a man like that.'

For a moment, the girl simply stared at him. She had expected indifference from a stranger—not this. Her large, almond-shaped brown eyes moved slowly over his face, as though trying to understand the man who had willingly stepped into danger for her. When she finally spoke, her voice was barely a whisper.

'I don't think you know what you're getting yourself into.'

Zubby looked directly into her eyes.

'Maybe I don't.' He paused. But I know one thing. There's no

way I'm leaving you alone with this guy.'

Before she could respond, the shriek of screeching tyres tore through the car park. A black Mercedes-Benz SUV came skidding to a halt. The doors flew open. Two heavily built men stepped out, their muscular frames and grim expressions instantly transforming the atmosphere.

The girl's face drained of colour.

Zubby slowly turned towards them.

'That's him,' the attacker declared, punctuating his words with a jab of his walking stick directed squarely at Zubby. 'This punk had the guts to lay his filthy hands on me. I want you to teach him a lesson he will never forget.'



‘No! Jim, stop this! Please let him go,’ the girl begged.’

Planting herself firmly in front of Zubby, shielding him with her body despite the danger looming before her, the girl pleaded, ‘Leave him alone, Jim. Please.’ Her voice trembled with desperation, but beneath it was a quiet, unwavering defiance.

He scoffed at her. ‘Let him go? After what he did to me? You must be out of your fucking mind.’

In a brutal display of contempt, one of the men seized the girl by the arm and roughly shoved her aside, sending her stumbling backwards as the confrontation took a menacing turn.

Now, it was just them versus Zubby.

As the thugs closed in around him, Zubby suddenly realized the gravity of the situation. ‘These guys could kill me’, he muttered to himself. His heart sank at the thought that he was never going to make his interview, but a deeper conviction whispered that he had made the right choice by stepping in.

Advancing menacingly toward Zubby, the men sneered at him, emphasizing their menace by rhythmically slamming their fists into their palms.

Around them, doors creaked open. Footsteps approached. A few heads appeared at the edges of the car park—shadows gathering, drawn by the noise.

Someone whispered. Someone else lifted a phone.

No one stepped in.

The silence pressed in, heavy and uncomfortable.

With an air of defiance, Zubby addressed the impending clash, mustering the courage to say, ‘I see you boys want to play. Okay, let’s play.’

His words, though spoken with conviction, masked the internal turmoil that continued to churn beneath the surface. He shrugged off his jacket, tie and shirt, revealing a physique that spoke of strength and determination. Turning calmly toward the female, he held out the clothes. ‘Would you mind holding these for me?’

She took them from him, her fingers tightening slightly around the fabric. Her grip betrayed a subtle tension as she sensed what was about to happen.

As the first thug lunged at him, Zubby skillfully sidestepped, delivering a punishing blow by ramming his right knee into his belly. He crumbled to the ground in pain, but this defensive manoeuvre left Zubby vulnerable.

The unexpected assault from the second thug caught him off guard, the attacker targeting Zubby's legs with precision. As they grappled on the ground, the other thug shook off the pain and rushed in.

Zubby ended up on his back—exposed, out-matched. The two men descended on him, fists crashing down without mercy. Overwhelmed, Zubby curled into a fetal position, instinctively shielding his head and torso as the blows kept coming.

The thugs ignored the girl's desperate pleas for them to stop, continuing to rain blow after brutal blow upon Zubby's helpless body. He lay sprawled on the ground, defenceless and barely able to shield himself from the relentless assault.

A short distance away, Jim watched with a cold, satisfied smirk, seemingly relishing every moment of Zubby's suffering. The beating continued without mercy until Zubby's strength finally gave out and consciousness slipped away. Blood streamed from a deep gash above his right eye, streaking his battered face as he lay motionless on the ground.

As he lay passed out, Jim aimed one last kick at Zubby's rib cage. 'That'll teach you to mess with me, punk!

Now you,' he pointed at the girl with his walking stick, 'get into the fucking car. NOW!'

A fierce look of defiance set in the young lady's face. 'I'm not going anywhere with you.'

She hurried over to Zubby and knelt down beside him, crying. 'Look at what you've done to him, you evil monsters.'

‘Enter this car right now before I do something drastic,’ Jim snarled through gritted teeth.



‘What? You’re going to beat me again? Do your worst, Jim. Show everyone what a shameless coward you are.’

Jim slowly surveyed his surroundings, his sharp eyes taking in the growing crowd that had gathered around the unfolding drama. What had begun as a handful of curious onlookers had quickly swelled into a restless audience, drawn to the violence like moths to a flame.

For a fleeting moment, he considered ordering his thugs to drag the girl into the SUV. He dismissed the idea almost as quickly as it came.

The atmosphere had shifted.

The crowd was much larger now.

Moreover, the bystanders were no longer passive spectators. They were glaring at him, pointing openly in his direction, their faces hardening with anger and disgust.

Voices were rising. People were edging closer, emboldened by the growing numbers around them.

He knew the crowd was on the verge of taking matters into its own hands. If he made one wrong move, the increasingly hostile crowd would rush to the girl's defence, and the situation would explode into chaos within seconds.

More shoppers were emerging from the mall, stopping to see what the commotion was about.

Every passing second brought new witnesses.

Someone had almost certainly called the police.

The longer they stayed, the greater the risk of things spiralling out of control. It simply wasn't worth it.

Jim raised a hand in a subtle signal.

‘Let's go.’

Without another glance at Zubby or the girl, he strode calmly towards his car. Though people instinctively stepped aside to let him pass, their hostile stares followed him all the way to his gleaming Lamborghini.

He slipped a finger beneath the driver's-side door sill and pressed the concealed rubber release.

With a muted click, the scissor door sprang upward. He slid into the driver's seat, lowered the door, and pressed the start button. He jabbed the accelerator repeatedly, deliberately unleashing the V12 engine's fury. Each press produced another deafening roar, the powerful sound reverberating through the air.

The thunderous blasts echoed across the car park, silencing the crowd and forcing several onlookers to flinch.

Satisfied he'd made his point, he buried the throttle, and the Lamborghini lunged forward before sweeping towards the exit.

Behind him, the black SUV fell into formation, his thugs climbing aboard before following their boss out of the shopping mall, leaving behind only the stunned crowd, the battered young man lying on the ground, and the chaos they had created.

After Jim and his goons had left, a handful of onlookers rushed to offer assistance. Among them, a formally attired young man, his voice marked by a tinge of concern, remarked, 'Goodness gracious, he looks awful. What in heaven's name happened?'

'Please, help me get him to a hospital,' the young lady pleaded, desperation etching lines on her face. 'One of those thugs attacked me, and he tried to protect me. They wanted to kill him.'

'I believe there's a clinic nearby, the Etta Atlantic. Let's get him into my car.'

Feeling as though he had been dragged into a deep, impenetrable fog, Zubby slipped in and out of consciousness. He winced as they helped him to his feet. Every bone in his body seemed to ache, and a sharp, prickling sensation coursed through him.

With the help of several bystanders, they carefully eased him into the back seat of the benevolent stranger's car. The young woman, her expression a mixture of compassion and determination, gently pressed a handkerchief to the wound above Zubby's right eyebrow, doing her best to stem the bleeding.

‘I’m Frederick.’

‘Genevieve. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Frederick. Thank you ever so much for choosing to help us. You look like you were on your way to work.’

‘Yes, I was, but that’s not a big deal. Good thing I stopped by the mall. This guy needs help right now. Is he your boyfriend, husband...?’

‘No, I don’t even know who he is,’ she said in a voice thick with emotion. ‘I was being assaulted, and he stepped in to help me. He put his life on the line for me.’

I feel so bad about what just happened to him. There was nothing I could do. I begged them to stop, but they just carried on beating him.’

Her voice trembled with anger as she replayed the harrowing incident in her mind.

‘Eh yah, I’m sorry to hear that.’

It was about half a mile to the hospital. Fortunately, there was light traffic on the road that morning, and Genevieve breathed a huge sigh of relief when, at last, the Etta Atlantic came into view.

At the clinic’s front desk, Genevieve was asked to make a deposit of 75,000 naira to secure a treatment bed, which she paid without hesitation.

As the young woman behind the counter efficiently processed the payment, she asked to see Zubby’s ID, explaining that it was required by law for anyone with severe injuries. At that point, Genevieve realized that Zubby’s ID might be in his wallet or briefcase, which she had brought with her. She quickly searched through briefcase and found the requested identification. His name was Zubby Johnson, and he was twenty-five years old.

Beyond the formalities, the case contained something far more personal: Zubby’s CV and an interview letter, which Genevieve read with growing interest. Then the significance of what she was holding sank in, and a pang of guilt washed over her. Zubby had been on the verge of a potentially life-changing opportunity with a world-class company like Shell, yet he had sacrificed it all to protect her.

The full weight of his sacrifice struck Genevieve as she struggled to comprehend the depth of his selflessness. The clinic, meant to be a place of healing, had instead become a setting for painful revelations, exposing the devastating consequences endured by a man who had willingly put his own dreams on hold to protect someone else.

As the hospital staff ushered Zubby on a gurney through to the treatment room, Genevieve retraced her steps to rejoin Frederick.

‘So, what have you decided to do?’ Frederick asked.

Her response carried the weight of her newfound understanding. ‘I’ve just discovered how much he sacrificed for me. The least I can do is ensure he’s okay.’

Frederick, acknowledging the gravity of the situation, spoke with a pragmatic reassurance. ‘Well, my guess is that he’ll be fine because he looks like a fighter.’

‘I really hope so. The poor guy didn’t deserve any of this.’

‘Well, I’ll have to shoot off now.’

‘I understand, Frederick. Thank you so much for your help. I’m very grateful.’

After Zubby had been examined, Genevieve found herself seated in the doctor’s office, the weight of the recent events pressing on her.

The doctor, upon inspecting Zubby’s battered state, voiced his concern, ‘My goodness, what a beating this guy took. What happened?’

She recounted the harrowing encounter with a heavy heart.

‘Yes, he was attacked by savages. They wanted to kill him.’

‘You saw the whole thing?’

‘Yes,’ she nodded. ‘Doctor, I did.’

Concern etched the doctor’s voice as he shifted focus to her wellbeing. ‘Jesus, are you okay? That’s a nasty little bruise on your face. Let me take a closer look and make sure you’re okay.’

‘Oh no, doctor, I’m fine, and I have him to thank for that. It could have been much worse.’

The doctor, with a mix of empathy and professionalism, detailed Zubby's injuries. Despite the severity, he offered solace: 'He is in excellent physical condition. I am confident he will make a full recovery; there is nothing to worry about. It may take him a few weeks to get back to normal, but he'll be as good as new in 4 to 6 weeks, maybe even sooner.'

Relief washed over Genevieve; her eyes welled with tears. 'I'm so happy to hear that, Doctor. I beg of you, please do everything you can for him. Money is not an issue. This guy saved my life in so many ways, and I will pay the bill, no matter the cost. I just want him to be okay.'

'You don't need to worry. His injuries are fairly severe, but thankfully, they're mostly superficial. There's no damage to his internal organs, so he won't need surgery.'

'For now, I've given him a sedative so that he can get a complete rest. You'll be able to speak with him tomorrow. Come back around midday. He should be awake then. But he'll still be a little weak, with a few aches and pains.'

Genevieve again declined the doctor's offer to examine her, saying, 'No, Doctor. Honestly, I'm fine. I just need to rest for a little while. I'll be back tomorrow. Thank you so much for everything, Doctor.'

'I'm glad to help. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.'



THE SENSE OF relief Genevieve felt was palpable. She was naturally inclined to fear the worst. But even though Zubby's injuries sounded quite serious, she was relieved to hear that he would make a complete recovery.

She returned to his room, hung his jacket on a rack, and placed his other belongings on a table. Suddenly, she was interrupted by the sound of a ringing phone. It seemed to be coming from Zubby's jacket pocket.

She fished out the phone and answered it: 'Hello, this is Zubby's phone, who's this please?'

'This is Chidi. Can I speak to Zubby?'

‘Hi, I’m Genevieve. I’m a friend of Zubby’s. I’m afraid there’s been a little accident and Zubby cannot answer the phone right now. He’s been admitted to hospital.’

‘Accident? Hospital? Is he okay?’

‘Yes, he is perfectly fine,’ Genevieve said reassuringly. ‘He’s just resting. The doctor says he’ll be free to leave in a day or so.’

‘Oh, thank God. You had me worried there,’ Chidi said with a sigh of relief.

‘Are you his brother, friend...’

‘Well, I’m a close friend, I’m also his housemate, Chidi.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, as I said, there’s nothing to worry about...He’s going to be fine.’

‘And you are...?’

‘I’m Genevieve. We haven’t met. I look forward to meeting you soon.’

‘Likewise. But I thought I knew all of Zubby’s friends. He’s never mentioned you.’

‘We only met today. It’s a long story...’

‘Oh, okay. Well, please tell Zubby I called. I was hoping to find out how... never mind. I’ll speak to him tomorrow anyway.’

‘Thank you. See you soon,’ she said and hung up. She then tucked Zubby’s phone back into his jacket pocket.

A few minutes later, Genevieve pulled out her phone, ordered an Uber, and left the clinic.



FOR A BRIEF moment, Zubby wondered if he had died as he struggled to sit up. Even though he was awake, he was unable to move or speak.

He could feel his ragged breathing and his heart beating a little fast. No, he wasn’t dead. But he seemed to be lost. He tried to pull his thoughts together.

As it turned out, he had been experiencing sleep paralysis and regained consciousness shortly afterwards. Even then, he remained disoriented, a lingering confusion clouding his expression.



He struggled to make sense of where he was.

Where am I?

What was I doing before I got here?

As he slowly pushed himself into a sitting position, a crushing migraine exploded through his skull—the most intense, relentless pain he had ever experienced. Every movement sent fresh waves of agony pulsing through his head, forcing him to stop and brace himself against the bed.

His head felt as if someone was banging it with a hammer. He lifted his hand to feel his forehead, then saw...

His hand.

It was covered in bandages and had an IV sticking out of it.

With a shudder of revulsion, Zubby impulsively tried to sit up again, but this time he triggered pain in his torso, particularly his ribs. His horror mounted. He couldn't move.

What in God's name happened to me?

He glanced around and forced himself to focus on his surroundings... the plain white walls... the sounds of ET machines.

He was in a hospital!?!

He frantically tried to get up again, but the more he tried to move, the worse the pain became. There was nothing he could do.

A flood of painful memories came rushing back to him as he remembered the fight. A sigh of despair escaped his lips. It felt like his head was splitting and he was nauseous. Obviously, he had been given too many painkillers.

In vain, he attempted to get up once more. It was at this point that he decided it would be best to simply lie still. Within minutes, he was dead to the world and sleeping peacefully.



JUST AFTER TEN the following morning, Genevieve stepped inside Zubby's room carrying a small bag of fruit and toiletries, but at the sight of him, a jolt ran through her—as if she'd touched a live wire.

The sight undid her. Her composure shattered.

'Jesus Christ...' she whispered.

Her hand flew to her mouth as tears instantly filled her eyes.

Zubby managed a weak smile. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Don't joke, Zubby,' she said shakily. 'Look at you.'

'They did a pretty good job, didn't they?'

She glared at him.

'Zubby, please stop!'

'Sorry.'

She broke down crying.

Zubby winced slightly as she carefully held his hand. 'Hey... hey...' he murmured softly. 'I'm still alive.'

'You almost died because of me! They could've killed you.'

'They tried,' Zubby said with a faint chuckle, before groaning from the pain in his ribs.

‘Please don’t laugh,’ she said through tears. ‘You’re badly hurt.’ She was so beautiful, he thought—even now.

At five foot four, Genevieve possessed a quiet, captivating radiance. Her almond-shaped eyes, framed by perfectly arched brows, seemed to hold an entire world of emotion—kindness, sensitivity, and quiet strength. Her smooth, mocha-toned complexion complemented her graceful features, giving her an effortless elegance that made it almost impossible for him to look away.

And in that moment, despite the pain, Zubby felt something unmistakable stir inside him.

The machines filled the room with soft, rhythmic beeps. Outside the window, Lagos moved on—cars, voices, life continuing as if nothing had happened.

‘How are you feeling?’ she asked, her voice low.

Zubby considered it for a moment. ‘Like I lost a fight with a truck,’ he said at last. Then, almost apologetically, he added, ‘But I’ve had worse days.’

A small smile touched her lips—quick, involuntary. For a moment, silence filled the room.

‘I’m glad you’re awake,’ she said. ‘The doctor said you might still be asleep.’

‘So did my body,’ he replied with a faint smile. ‘It keeps trying to drag me back under. We’re still negotiating.’

Genevieve looked down at him, guilt written all over her face, then pressed her lips together.

Concerned about his family, she asked, ‘what about your siblings, parents, Zubby? Is there someone I can call?’

She sensed his discomfort at the mention of his parents, regretting the question immediately. ‘I’m sorry, I...’

‘No, it’s okay, I’m an only child. I just can’t talk about my parents right now. What about you? Have you told your parents what happened to you?’

‘No, not yet. I am going to tell them, but not just yet. I will have to take you to meet them. They will want to thank you personally for what you did for me.’

The words settled between them, warm and charged. ‘I never even got your name yesterday,’ he said.

‘Genevieve.’

‘Then we’re even,’ he replied. ‘You already know who I am.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I found your ID.’

A pause.

‘And your bag.’

His expression changed—not defensive, just thoughtful. ‘My interview,’ he said quietly.

She nodded. ‘Shell Oil.’

He let out a slow breath. ‘Yeah.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I should never have—’

‘Hey.’ He lifted his hand slightly, stopping her. ‘Don’t.’

She met his eyes, surprised by the gentleness in his voice.

‘I don’t regret it,’ he said. ‘That animal was hurting you. I couldn’t just do nothing and walk away.’

Her throat tightened. ‘You gave up something big... for someone you didn’t even know.’

Zubby gave a weak shrug. ‘For someone who needed help.’

Then, softer, ‘I didn’t need to know you.’

She looked at him for a long moment. ‘Why?’ she asked.

He hesitated. Just enough.

‘Because I know what it feels like,’ he said quietly, ‘when no one steps in.’

Then he added, almost under his breath, ‘And because I couldn’t stand the thought of you being hurt.’

Genevieve’s lips trembled. ‘Thank you,’ she said quietly. ‘For saving me. You’re too good for this world, Zubby.’

He looked away, suddenly self-conscious. He smiled faintly.

‘Trust me... I’m not as good as you think.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ she whispered again.

‘Stop apologizing.’

Silence returned—but it was different now.

Softer.

Intimate.

She reached for his hand, careful not to disturb the IV.

‘I owe you.’

‘No.’

‘What do you mean, no?’

‘You don’t owe me anything.’

‘But—’

‘No debts. No obligations. No repayment.’

Genevieve fell silent.

‘Would you mind if I called Shell Oil and explained what happened?’ she asked gently. ‘They might be willing to reschedule your interview. It’s certainly worth a try.’

‘Would you?’ Zubby said, surprised. ‘That’s a great idea. The HR manager’s number is on the interview letter.’

‘I know,’ Genevieve said. ‘I’ll get it.’

She reached into Zubby’s bag, took out the letter, and carefully copied the interviewer’s name and number into her phone.

She shifted in her chair. ‘I should let you rest.’

He glanced at her, unsure. ‘You don’t have to go.’

Her eyes searched his face. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It’s... easier when you’re here.’

A faint smile curved her lips.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Then I’ll stay. For a bit.’

Their gazes held a second too long this time—something unspoken passing between them.

Then Genevieve squeezed his hand.

‘Thank you, Zubby.’

He looked at her.

This time, there was no joke in his eyes.

'You're welcome, Genevieve.'

She hesitated. 'I was so afraid for you.'

Zubby held her gaze.

'I was afraid too.' He gave her a faint smile. 'Mostly that you'd blame yourself.'

A tear slipped down her cheek.

He smiled. Zubby leaned back against the pillows, pain still there, but quieter now.

'Next time,' he murmured, wincing as he managed a crooked grin, 'I'll ask the thugs to go easy on my face. It's my best feature.'

Genevieve let out a watery laugh and shook her head.

'You really are something.'

'I prefer "heroically stubborn." Sounds much more flattering.'

'It sounds like someone with a serious concussion.'

'That would explain why I thought taking on three guys was a brilliant idea.'

She laughed again, the sound breaking through her tears. For a moment, the pain and fear seemed to recede.

'You're impossible.'

Zubby squeezed her hand with what little strength he had left. 'And yet,' he said softly, his eyes fixed on hers, 'the first thing I saw when I woke up... was you.'

Her eyes glistened. 'Of course I came.'

'So... does this mean you'll visit me again?'

She rolled her eyes, smiling despite herself.

'Only if you promise to stop collecting injuries just to get my attention.'

He gave her a faint, satisfied smile.

'No promises.'

For the first time since she'd stepped into the room, Genevieve smiled without the tears winning.



IN THE ENSUING weeks, Genevieve devoted herself to helping Zubby recover, patiently nursing him back to health until, little by little, he returned to his old self. His remarkable physical fitness defied the initial prognosis, allowing him to rebound with an agility that left the medical predictions trailing in his swift recovery.

Although Shell Oil had been extremely sympathetic to what had happened to Zubby, they were unable to reschedule the interview as the position needed to be filled immediately.

Even after Zubby's triumphant return to full health, their companionship persisted, unveiling subtleties that went beyond the ordeal they had endured together.

During one of their routine outings, Genevieve decided to broach the delicate subject of Zubby's parents. She had sensed a deep sensitivity whenever the subject arose, and her growing curiosity made her determined to understand the mystery behind his reluctance to talk about them.

'What about your parents?' she asked quietly, choosing her words with care. 'Could you please tell me what happened that makes you so sensitive to talking about them?'

Zubby's gaze fell to his hands, fingers intertwined as if wrestling with the weight of uncomfortable memories.

'Zubby?' Genevieve pressed gently, recognizing that beneath the surface lay a narrative that had profoundly shaped him.

After a contemplative pause, Zubby decided to share the untold chapters of his past with Genevieve. His voice carried a somber weight as he began to unravel the painful tapestry of his childhood.

'I watched my father beat my mother to death when I was just a child.'

'Holy Mary, Mother of God!' Genevieve instinctively crossed herself. A wave of horror swept over her as she listened intently to the heart-wrenching account. The story that unfolded revealed the haunting roots from which Zubby had emerged, giving Genevieve a deeper understanding of the experiences that had shaped the man he had become.

The weight of the past bore heavily on his shoulders as he recounted the haunting details of his traumatic childhood.

‘I was 10 years old,’ he began, his voice tinged with a mixture of pain and vulnerability. ‘When my father was made redundant, he practically changed overnight. He drank heavily and subjected my mother to relentless abuse every single day, as if she were the punching bag for all his rage over losing his job.’

As the echoes of Zubby’s words lingered, Genevieve’s heart filled with empathy and sorrow. In that moment, something between them deepened—a bond forged through shared vulnerability and an unspoken recognition of the extraordinary resilience it had taken for Zubby to rise above the scars of his past.

‘Each time I stepped in, he lashed out at me too. Eventually, I backed off—I felt powerless.’

Zubby’s gaze turned distant as he revisited the nightmarish memories. ‘I got sick of hearing my mother cry almost every night, begging him to stop. But instead of doing something, I just cried. I covered my ears and I cried.’

The weight of guilt bore down on him. ‘I did nothing to help her. I didn’t fight for her. Sometimes I feel my mother died because I was a coward—because I was too afraid to stand up for her when she needed me most. I failed her, and that’s something I’ll have to live with for the rest of my life.’

‘In the days that followed her death, I experienced vivid flashbacks of my mother’s painful moments every time I tried to sleep. I vowed to never let any woman down as I did my mother. When I saw that guy assaulting you, something took over me. I couldn’t have walked away, no matter what. Every instinct in me demanded that I protect you.’

As she absorbed his heart-wrenching tale with tears welling in her eyes, Genevieve clasped his hands firmly in hers, mirroring the profound sorrow etched on his face.



In that raw moment, Genevieve tightened her grip on Zubby's hands. Her eyes held an intensity that mirrored the depth of her empathy.

'Zubby... I'm so sorry for the horrific experience you suffered through, but it's not your fault that your mother died. You weren't a coward. You were still only a child for Christ's sake and the situation was beyond your control. Your father is totally responsible for what you are blaming yourself for.'

She continued with a firm resolve: 'I appreciate what you did for me, really, I do. However, those thugs who attacked you could've killed you. You cannot continue to put your life at risk because you feel guilty for something you were not even responsible for in the first place. You aren't being fair to yourself at all. Your mother wouldn't like that.'

Zubby absorbed her words, his gaze locking with hers in a silent exchange that conveyed more than words ever could. 'I hear what you're saying Genevieve, but I just can't help feeling the way I do,' he said tearfully.

'What eventually happened to your dad?'

'He got life. The only comfort I have is knowing that whatever he's going through now is far worse than what my mother endured—because he's locked up with hardened criminals who are almost certainly making his life a living hell.'

'And I remember you mentioned you're an only child?'

'Actually, I have a sister who's lived in the US her entire life.'

'She left Nigeria when I was five. She only came back for our mother's funeral, and she hasn't been back since. Still, she made sure I was well taken care of when I was growing up.' He paused, then gave a small shrug. 'But enough about me. What about you?'

'Well, I am currently doing my youth service. I graduated from the University of Lagos with a first in law. Right now, I work for a big law firm in Victoria Island.'

'So, how did you end up entangled with that creep? I just can't understand the connection between you both.'

'The law firm I work for represented him. I handled all the paperwork for his apartment purchase in Eko Atlantic City. Then one day, I ran into him in a store, and he insisted on paying for everything I picked out. At the time, it felt thoughtful—generous, even.'

But afterward, he wanted a relationship. He kept pushing for dates, wouldn't take no for an answer. And I wasn't interested. That day, we were on our way to a business meeting and decided to stop briefly at a mall in Lekki. That's when he pulled out first-class tickets to Dubai.

He wanted to fly me there for my birthday weekend.’

She exhaled.

‘I said no. Politely. That’s when he got angry—and everything spiraled. I don’t want to talk about him anymore,’ she said quietly. ‘That chapter is closed.’

Their eyes met, and something unspoken passed between them. It wasn’t an awkward silence, but an easy, comfortable one—a quiet understanding that settled between them, wrapping them in its warmth.

They didn’t notice how much time had slipped away. Hours dissolved into conversation and soft laughter, carried by the rare comfort of two people discovering how naturally they fit together.

‘Goodness gracious... is that the time?’

He chuckled softly. ‘I guess it’s true—time really does disappear when you’re having fun.’ His voice dropped, just a little. ‘And when I’m with you, Genevieve, it doesn’t just disappear. It slips away.’

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she reached for his hand, her fingers threading gently through his. Her touch was deliberate, intimate. She looked up at him, eyes warm, searching his face.

‘I’m glad you feel that way,’ she said, her voice low, sincere. ‘Because being here with you... it feels easy. Right. Like I don’t want the night to end.’

She squeezed his hand softly, holding his gaze a moment longer than necessary. In the soft glow of the evening, with an air laden with unspoken emotions, the world outside seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them immersed in the magic of a shared moment.



GENEVIEVE’S PARENTS WERE accomplished chartered accountants who ran a thriving private practice. Their residence was a pearly white, architecturally exquisite 5-bedroom haven framed by meticulously manicured grounds, nestled within a gated

and secure community on Victoria Island. As a gesture of gratitude, they invited Zubby to Sunday lunch. Genevieve arrived at precisely 2:00 p.m. to pick him up, her trademark smile brightening her face as she pulled up in her vibrant yellow Volkswagen Beetle.

During their journey to Victoria Island, the sky transformed into a sombre grey-blue, foreshadowing the imminent deluge of monsoon rains that typically plunged Lagos drivers into a tumult of utter panic. Fortunately, traffic was light, and their journey remained unhindered by the impending weather.

A cheerful gateman welcomed Genevieve and Zubby as they entered the compound. Following the driveway flanked by dense bushes, trees, and shrubs, they reached a courtyard where they parked. Genevieve's bungalow, separated from the main house by a luxuriant garden adorned with stone fountains, exuded an air of tranquillity and elegance. Her family was small. She had a younger brother studying business at Buckingham University in the UK.

Her father, Olu Asabia, was a tall, commanding presence—well over six feet—yet carried himself with easy warmth. At sixty-one, he looked remarkably youthful, impeccably dressed, effortlessly dapper. A full, neatly groomed beard, almost entirely grey, framed his face.

The moment he saw them enter the lobby, he crossed the room and pulled Zubby into a powerful bear hug, laughing as he did.

'Zubby—thank you for coming.' He said, his grin wide and genuine as he pulled Zubby into a warm embrace. 'Genevieve told us everything you did for her. I really can't thank you enough.'

Zubby smiled, slightly overwhelmed. 'It was my pleasure, sir.'

Genevieve's mother stepped forward next, elegance radiating from her. She wore horn-rimmed glasses and a guinea brocade kaftan, her embrace warm as she welcomed Zubby into their home.

Her brown, almond-shaped eyes—so strikingly similar to Genevieve's—held both softness and quiet scrutiny. It was clear Genevieve had inherited more than her mother's features; the warmth, the curiosity, the depth behind that gaze spoke of a shared spirit, not just shared blood.



The Asabias graciously ushered Zubby into their luxurious and inviting home. It was plush without being ostentatious, refined in a way that spoke of long earned comfort rather than display.

Clearly fond of African art, they adorned their home with an assortment of masterpieces by renowned African artists. The hallway and lounge boasted an array of elegant murals and woodcarvings.

Zubby took it all in carefully, conscious of the faint scuff on his shoe against the marble floor. This was a world he had only ever observed from a distance.

'Lunch will be ready soon,' Genevieve's mother announced. As she hurried to the kitchen to complete the meal preparations, she invited Genevieve to join her.

This left the two men alone in the living room, providing an opportunity for them to acquaint themselves.

‘I have something for you,’ said Genevieve’s father. Taking out an envelope from his shirt pocket, he passed it to Zubby. ‘Go ahead, open it.’ Zubby obliged and found a stack of bank notes inside, which he later learned was 500,000 naira. ‘This is just a small token of appreciation for what you did for my precious daughter.’

Zubby was pleasantly surprised and humbled. ‘Thank you very much sir, I’m truly grateful, but I would have done the same for any woman I encountered in a similar situation,’ he replied politely.

‘What a refreshing thing to hear,’ Olu remarked. It’s an honor to meet you, young man. Not enough people think like that. I can’t thank you enough for what you did.’

‘I am more than grateful for your gift, sir,’ he replied.

‘Can I get you something to drink? We have beer, whiskey, brandy, palm wine, juice, soft drinks... What would you like?’

‘A glass of cold water would be fine sir, thank you sir.’

‘Water? No guest has ever asked for just water among the many I have entertained.’

‘Alcohol changed my life in ways I can’t undo, sir. I lost someone really precious to me. So I never drink anything except water. It may sound unusual, but that’s how it is for me.’

‘How interesting,’ Olu said thoughtfully. ‘I respect how you feel, Zubby. Water it is.’

He asked a servant to bring Zubby a glass of iced water.

‘So, tell me about yourself, Zubby. What’s your background?’

‘I’m an Economics graduate. I studied at the University of Maiduguri.

‘Up North? It’s become quite dangerous on that side.’

‘Yes sir, it has. Fortunately, I left just before the terrorists began their reign of terror.

‘Thank goodness you were not caught up in that situation and were able to complete your education. Our government seems helpless in the face of these terrible circumstances.’

His voice was full of regret as he shook his head and said, ‘I have no idea where we’re headed as a nation.’

Zubby listened, aware of the contrast between them—not just in wealth, but in insulation. Olu spoke of national uncertainty from a place of security. Zubby had lived it from the inside.

Still, the conversation flowed easily. Olu asked about Zubby’s ambitions, his plans, his outlook—careful to avoid any mention of family, as Genevieve had quietly requested.



Genevieve re-entered the room after a few minutes and announced that lunch was ready. They ate in the large dining room, with sunlight from the sinking sun illuminating the room. The table was long, polished, immaculate. The food was abundant, beautifully presented.



Laughter flowed as freely as the conversation, drifting effortlessly from childhood stories to football, from Lagos traffic to the strange habits people picked up as adults. It was the kind of easy laughter that made time slip unnoticed, punctuated by the clinking of cutlery and the occasional burst of amusement that left everyone smiling.

Genevieve's father was in his element, happily recounting one embarrassing story after another—most of them involving Genevieve as a stubborn child. Her protests only encouraged him.

'Dad, that happened once.'

'It happened enough for me to remember it.'

Her mother chuckled as she passed another serving dish around the table.

'More jollof, Zubby?'

'Oh... thank you, ma'am.'

He accepted the serving spoon politely and placed only a very modest helping onto his plate before passing it along.

Genevieve's mother paused.

'Is that all?'

'Yes, ma'am. That's perfect.'

She blinked at his plate, then at the mountain of food spread across the dining table.

'My dear,' she said with mock concern, 'did you misunderstand? This isn't a tasting ceremony. You're actually allowed to eat.'

Everyone laughed.

Zubby smiled sheepishly. 'I don't usually eat very much.'

She looked at her husband.

'I hope he isn't just being polite.'

Genevieve's father laughed. 'My dear, that's nothing.'

His wife frowned. 'Nothing?'

'You haven't seen anything yet.'

She folded her arms with amused curiosity.

‘What do you mean?’

He pointed his fork toward Zubby.

‘Tell her what you drink.’

Zubby looked mildly embarrassed.

‘It’s... not that interesting.’

‘Oh, it is interesting,’ her father insisted. ‘Go on.’

Zubby rubbed the back of his neck.

‘Just... water.’

Silence.

Genevieve’s mother stared at him.

‘Water?’

‘Yes, ma.’

She leaned back in disbelief.

‘What kind of twenty-something-year-old are you?’

The table erupted into laughter.

‘I just... prefer water,’ Zubby admitted with a sheepish grin.

Her father chuckled.

‘I offered him everything earlier,’ he said, chuckling. ‘I said, Zubby, you can have whatever you want—beer, whisky, champagne, wine, soft drinks, juice... we’ve got it all. He turns around and says ‘a glass of water please sir.’

The table burst into laughter.

She turned to Genevieve.

‘Is he for real?’

‘Come to think of it, I’ve never seen him drink anything else,’ Genevieve said, laughing.

Her mother looked back at Zubby, studying him for a moment before smiling warmly. ‘Well... I have to say, that’s impressive.’

Zubby looked surprised.

‘It is?’

‘Absolutely.’ She gestured toward the bottles arranged neatly on the sideboard.

‘Most people can’t resist one or two little indulgences. Yet here you are, happy with plain water.’

She smiled approvingly. ‘That tells me you’re a very disciplined young man.’

‘Oh, I don’t know about that...’

‘No, I think it does.’ She pointed playfully at him. ‘People think discipline shows up in grand gestures. Most of the time, it shows up in little everyday choices that nobody notices.’

Genevieve caught Zubby’s eye.

He looked genuinely uncomfortable with the praise.

‘I just never got into sugary drinks.’

Her father laughed. ‘Listen to him. He’s making it sound accidental.’

Somehow, despite all the teasing, Zubby had become the center of the conversation without ever trying to be. And judging by the warmth in her parents’ smiles, they weren’t merely enjoying his company anymore. They were beginning to admire the quiet, unassuming young man sitting at their table.

When the meal ended, Genevieve and her mother cleared the table with the help of a servant. Though Zubby offered to assist, he was gently ushered into the living room, where Olu had already settled in to watch an English Premier League match.

Olu shared Zubby’s passion for football, and the game quickly became a pleasant, easy distraction.

Not long after the match ended, Zubby decided it was time to leave. Genevieve’s parents bid him farewell, once again expressing their heartfelt gratitude for what he had done for their daughter. He thanked them in return—for their generosity, the delicious lunch, and the lovely evening.

Arrangements were made for him to be driven home. As the driver went to bring the car around, Genevieve walked him outside.

‘Thank you for a wonderful evening, your parents are lovely.’

‘They are,’ she replied with a smile. ‘And they loved you. I’m glad you enjoyed yourself.’

The late afternoon sun had softened, and a gentle breeze rustled the hedges lining the driveway. For a few moments, neither of them spoke.

Genevieve folded her arms and glanced sideways at him.

‘So...’

Zubby smiled.

‘So?’

‘What was that all about?’

He frowned.

‘What?’

‘The water.’

‘Oh.’

‘You seriously don't drink anything else?’

He shrugged.

‘Not really.’

She nudged him lightly with her elbow.

‘Come on, Zubby. Everyone was looking at you like you were an exhibit in a museum.’

He laughed softly.

‘I noticed.’

‘So... why?’

His smile faded.

For several seconds, he said nothing.

Genevieve immediately regretted asking.

‘You don't have to answer if it's personal.’

‘No...’ he said quietly. ‘It's okay.’

He looked out toward the gate instead of at her.

‘It's just... not a story I tell very often.’

She waited.

‘When I was little,’ he began, ‘my mum used to spoil me.’

A faint smile appeared on his face.

‘Every day after school she'd have something waiting for me.’

‘Sweets?’

‘Sweets.’

He nodded.

‘Chocolate. Soft drinks. Biscuits. Sometimes she'd surprise me with cake or ice cream.’

He chuckled under his breath.

‘I thought she had magical powers. Somehow she always knew exactly what I was craving.’

Genevieve smiled, picturing the little boy he must have been.

‘She sounds wonderful.’

‘She was.’

His voice softened.

‘Those little treats became... our thing.’

The smile lingered for a moment.

Then disappeared.

‘When she died...’

His words caught in his throat.

‘...it was strange.’

He swallowed hard. ‘I kept expecting to want those things.’

Genevieve remained silent.

‘But I didn't.’

He looked down at his hands. ‘It wasn't a decision.’

‘It just... stopped.’

‘I'd walk past the shelves in shops and feel nothing.’

‘No cravings.’

‘No excitement.’

‘Nothing.’

He gave a small, almost apologetic shrug.

‘It was like something inside me had gone quiet.’

Genevieve's chest tightened.

‘I lost more than my mum.’

He took a slow breath.

‘I lost my appetite.’

He nodded.

He smiled sadly.

'Not just for sweets.'

'For a lot of things.'

'I started eating because I needed to.'

'Not because I wanted to.'

Genevieve searched his face.

'So that's why you eat so little?'

He nodded.

'I've been like this ever since.'

'And the water?'

He looked at the bottle in his hand.

'Water never reminded me of anything.'

She frowned slightly. 'The soft drinks did.'

'They reminded me of her.'

He laughed softly, though there was no joy in it.

'Every bottle of Fanta or Coke reminded me of coming home from school and hearing her call my name.'

His eyes glistened 'I suppose... after she was gone...'

He paused.

'...I couldn't enjoy them anymore.'

Genevieve felt tears prick the corners of her eyes.

'Oh, Zubby...'

He looked at her and offered the same gentle smile she'd come to know.

'It's been years.'

'I know.'

'It doesn't hurt every day anymore.'

He looked toward the sky.

'But every now and then...'

'...you discover that grief has been hiding in places you never thought to look.'

She reached for his hand without thinking.

He looked down, surprised.

'I thought,' she whispered, 'it was about discipline.'

He smiled sadly.

'No.'

He squeezed her hand gently.

'I was just heartbroken.'

The words hung between them.

Simple.

Honest.

Devastating.

Genevieve felt her throat tighten.

For the first time since she'd met him, she understood that Zubby's quietness wasn't shyness.

It was the silence left behind by someone whose happiest memories had become the hardest to revisit.

The sound of the approaching car broke the moment.

The driver pulled into the driveway and stepped out to open the rear door.

Neither of them moved immediately.

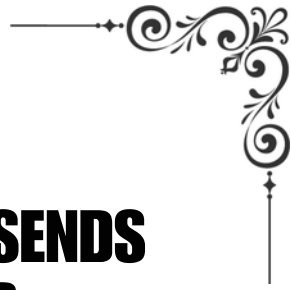
Genevieve looked at him, her eyes shimmering.

'I'm really glad you told me.'

'So am I,' he said softly.

He wasn't entirely sure why.

Perhaps because, for the first time in a very long while, sharing the memory hadn't made him feel alone. As he climbed into the car, Genevieve remained standing in the driveway, watching him leave. She no longer saw the polite, reserved young man who drank nothing but water. She saw the little boy who had lost the person who made the world taste sweet.



2

WHEN DESTINY SENDS A STRANGER

Zainab casually strolled into the Leventis grocery store on Lagos Island, her shopping list neatly cradled between two impeccably manicured fingers. Car keys dangled from her pinky, while her free hand scrolled through messages on her phone.

Athletic and finely tuned, her body moved with quiet confidence as the fluorescent lights of the supermarket washed over her smooth, caramel complexion. The artificial glow softened her features, lending her an almost ethereal radiance. A baseball cap sat low on her head, but it did little to contain the cascade of curls framing her face—effortlessly glamorous, unmistakably arresting.

She carried herself in a way that drew the eye without demanding it.



Once a month, Zainab reserved her grocery shopping for Sunday nights, deliberately avoiding the punishing Lagos heat. The sun here felt personal—vindictive even—bearing down with an intensity she had never fully prepared for. It was nothing like the temperate calm of the UK, where she had spent her formative years.

Returning to Nigeria had always been her dream, but she hadn't anticipated how relentless the heat would be. She would sooner tolerate hunger than shop during the day, unwilling to expose skin she carefully nurtured to the sun's unforgiving glare.

Her parents, ever practical, had suggested hiring a maid to handle errands like this. Zainab refused. The idea of handing over pieces of her private life unsettled her. Too many stories filled the news—petty theft, betrayals, worse. In this city, trust was a luxury. Privacy, a necessity. Guarding it took effort, but she considered the cost worth paying.



Her disdain deepened as another message filtered through. 'What's his problem?' she muttered. Ramsey informed her that he couldn't provide the inventory records she had requested.

She pursed her lips, annoyed. Zainab wondered why she was even concerned about this in the first place. After all, as the HR manager, checking on inventory wasn't her primary responsibility.

Maybe it was her perfectionist side coming to play. She refused to function in an environment where standards were compromised, and she took it upon herself to ensure just that. As a result, she found herself delving into details that extended beyond her designated role.

Zainab: 'But, I gave you a lot of time to deliver. What's the matter this time?

Ramsey: 'I'm sorry, something personal came up.'

Zainab: 'Not good enough, Ramsey.'

She sighed as she reached a platform where the shopping trolleys were. Grabbing a trolley, she freed her hands of her bag and car keys, placing them neatly in the trolley's tray.

There was a time she had been into this guy, Ramsey. Tall, good looking—he checked all the boxes. However, there was a significant catch; he was under her, and she was his boss.

Office relationships were complicated enough without power dynamics muddying the waters. The gossip. The scrutiny. The distractions. She had no patience for any of it. She began loading her purchases.

She glanced at her watch. It was already a few minutes past eight. Pulling out her shopping list, she made her way methodically through the aisles, comparing labels and placing item after item into the trolley. Buying in bulk meant it would be brimming in no time.



IT HAD BEEN an exceptionally profitable week for Jim. In just three days, he'd pulled in over fifty thousand dollars—without lifting a finger. Publicly, Jim was a highly skilled Crypto and Forex trader. Privately, he ran a carefully engineered, ruthless investment scam, aggressively marketed across social media platforms. His pitch was simple and seductive: a one-thousand-percent return within seventy-two hours, for a modest initial fee of \$995.



He targeted young men—mostly in their twenties and thirties—hungry for fast money. Jim promised to trade Futures, Crypto and Forex on their behalf using his advanced trading robots.

The illusion was convincing.

His social media pages overflowed with videos of him in exotic locations, flaunting luxury cars, private jets, five-star resorts. Daily uploads showed videos of his AI robots trading live, balances swelling into the millions. Carefully curated testimonials sealed the deal.

He smiled inwardly.

They came willingly. Begging, sometimes. Investing their money with hope clenched tightly in their hearts.

Only a handful ever made money. Those with followers.

Amplifiers.

The rest were noise.

Expendable.

He headed for the champagne aisle.



ZAINAB CHECKED HER list again. .

She liked efficiency. Predictability. Control.

Her trolley was half-full now. Fruits. Olive oil. Cleaning supplies. Protein bars. Everything accounted for.

Another buzz.

She ignored it this time.

Somewhere behind her, a trolley wheel squeaked. She slowed. Then continued.



JIM SELECTED THREE bottles of Dom Pérignon and two bottles of Hennessy without so much as glancing at the prices. He turned each bottle slowly in his hand, inspecting it with quiet satisfaction. Celebration was part of the ritual. It reminded him why he did this.

Power was best enjoyed quietly.

As he turned, his gaze lifted—and landed on Zainab. He paused.

Not because she was beautiful—though she was. Something about the way she carried herself caught his attention. She had the composure of someone who did not bend easily.

Controlled posture. Alert eyes. A woman who noticed details.

Jim's smile remained unchanged, but something colder settled behind it.

Interesting.



'WOULD THAT BE cash or credit, ma'am?' The cashier asked.

'Card,' Zainab replied as she reached into her shoulder bag to grab her purse. Suddenly, she froze. There was no sign of her purse! Her heart leapt to her throat as she frantically emptied the contents of her bag on the counter.

She had lost her purse, and with it her ID, bankcards, credit cards, and everything else in it.

Frustration etched across her face, she exclaimed, ‘My purse has been stolen,’ she said aloud, her thick British accent sharpening with irritation.

She wasn’t worried about the money—she rarely carried cash, and her cards were protected by PINs—but the timing was infuriating. Of all the moments for this to happen, it had to be now. She couldn’t even pay for her groceries.



‘Well, I’m sorry to hear that, ma’am,’ the store cashier said sourly, ‘but there are customers waiting behind you.’

The growing impatience of the people behind her intensified, and their piercing glares burned holes in her back. Zainab felt the heat rise to her face. She was rarely rattled—but this was different. Public. Uncomfortable. Humiliating. Angry tears burned at the corners of her eyes.

Jim decided to step in at this point.

‘I will pay for all of her shopping. The least you could do is show some sympathy, instead of making the poor lady feel worse than she already is,’ he said with a smile directed at Zainab.

‘Put everything on my tab, including my drinks.’

All eyes shifted to Jim as he wheeled his trolley to the front, loaded his purchases onto the counter, and handed his credit card to the cashier.

Zainab, still in disbelief, found her voice when he finished and looked at him with a grateful smile. ‘I’m ever so grateful sir,’ she said. ‘I’ll need your contact details so I can pay you back, Mr...’

‘I’m Jim,’ he cut in, smiling back. ‘Don’t worry about paying me back—it was my pleasure. When you’re free, we should have dinner or something. And you are...?’

‘Zainab Balogun. Nice to meet you Jim,’ she smiled as she raised her hand to shake his.

With his protruding belly, heavy gold chains, and flamboyant tracksuit, Jim was the polar opposite of what Zainab looked for in a partner. Still, the least she could do was be courteous. After all, the man had just saved her from one almighty headache.

‘Likewise,’ he said as his eyes crudely swept her shapely body.

He slipped something into her palm.

‘Here’s my card. I’ll be expecting your call.’

They loaded their shopping back into their trollies and exited the store together. Outside the store, Zainab watched Jim drive away in his exquisite Range Rover Sport. She then loaded her groceries into the trunk of her car.

Settling inside, she inserted the key into the ignition and attempted to start the car. However, the engine refused to cooperate, roaring briefly before sputtering out like a diseased animal. She twisted and twisted until she thought the car would explode if she continued.

‘What is it this time?’ She exclaimed aloud, clearly irritated. Her day had already been marred by the theft of her purse, and the subsequent supermarket scene, and now this.

‘It’s just not my day,’ she cried, slamming the steering wheel in frustration with both hands. Ominous thoughts ravaged her mind as she stood stranded outside a grocery store on a Sunday night with a non-functional car. It was overwhelming.

With a weary sigh, she climbed out of the car, lifted the bonnet, and leaned against it, burying her face in her hands in frustration. She was so overcome by her emotions that she didn't notice the Mazda MX-5 Convertible that had pulled up beside her.

As Zainab opened her eyes, she found herself met with a warm gaze from the man in the car. He glanced at her briefly and then shifted his attention to the car. Caught off guard by the unexpected audience, she straightened up and stared awkwardly.

There was a gleam in his eyes that made her want to know what he was thinking. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat, a distinctive feature that stood out as one of his most prominent attributes.

He gave her a small smile and shifted his attention to her car, 'You look like you're having a bit of a problem here.'

'Y-Y-Yeah,' she cleared her throat. Why was she suddenly so flustered? Heat spread through her neck to her face and she became more conscious of herself. 'Mind if I take a look?'

'Sure,' she said with a grateful nod, stepping aside as he climbed out of his car and walked over to inspect the open bonnet.



Besides his striking handsomeness, the man was impeccably groomed. His gaze was sharp, pinning her on the spot. He wore a polo shirt that clung to finely sculpted muscles and his shorts revealed strong, muscular legs. His angular jaw was clean-shaven, and his hair was cut into a sleek crew cut.

He walked up to the bonnet and tinkered with a few components inside. Climbing into the car, he tried to start the engine, but all it produced was a metallic clicking sound. After the unsuccessful attempt, he peered under the bonnet once more.

When he eventually looked at her, there was a smile on his face, offering a glimmer of hope that the issue might not be too serious.

‘You have a flat battery, that’s all.’

She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized it wasn’t anything more serious. ‘Not to worry, I can jump start your car with mine. Give me a minute,’ he said and disappeared into his car.

After switching off his car’s engine, he pulled out a jumper cable. Next, he opened the bonnet, searched for the negative and positive terminals, and plugged the cable into his car’s battery. He then connected the other ends to her car’s battery.

When he was done, he asked her to start the engine. It roared back to life, leaving her overwhelmed with relief. Expressing her gratitude, she began, ‘Thank you so much, Mr..’

‘I’m Godson,’ He stretched out his hand and took her palm in a handshake. She loved the feel of his skin against hers. It was surprisingly soft compared to his tough-looking outer exterior.

‘Zainab,’ she said. A thought began to take shape in her mind. She couldn’t simply let this man who had stirred something inside her disappear without a trace. There was something about him that intrigued her, something that pulled her toward him despite herself. She decided to do something she’d never done before. ‘Um... can we exchange numbers, if you don’t mind.’

He grinned. ‘Actually, I wanted to ask you the same thing, but I wasn’t sure how you’d take it.’

They exchanged numbers, exchanged smiles as they settled into their respective cars, and drove off in different directions. Each found themselves contemplating the encounter with the other.



AFTER THE INCIDENT at the supermarket, Zainab sent Jim a brief, polite message thanking him for coming to her aid. That should have been the end of it.

It wasn't.

Jim took her gratitude as an invitation to pursue her. He wanted more—a relationship—and despite her clear and repeated refusals, he refused to take no for an answer. Using her social media, he discovered where she worked. Soon, lavish gifts began arriving at The Cool Guys: flowers, perfume, expensive trinkets, each one accompanied by the unspoken expectation that persistence—and money—would eventually win her over.

But Zainab wasn't interested.

The more she rejected his advances, the more determined he became.

She said no. Firmly. Repeatedly.

Jim didn't listen.

The gifts kept coming.

What had started as mild irritation quickly hardened into frustration. She started rejecting the deliveries, growing more exasperated with each attempt. Eventually, she wanted nothing to do with him at all.



THE ENTRANCE TO The Cool Guys was unusually busy that afternoon. Customers drifted in and out, sales assistants hurried between the aisles, and the constant hum of conversation competed with the electronic beeps from the tills.

Zainab glanced at her watch and sighed.

Lunch. All she wanted was lunch.

She decided to head home, remembering the leftovers from dinner the night before. Her two-bedroom maisonette in 1004 Estate was less than a ten-minute drive from The Cool Guys—close enough for a quick, quiet lunch before returning to work.

She stepped through the revolving doors, juggling a tablet in one hand and her handbag in the other, and nearly walked straight into someone.

‘Whoa.’ She stopped abruptly.

‘Sorry,’ she said, looking up.

Then she smiled.

‘Godson?’

He grinned.

‘Well, well, well. Look who finally remembered I exist.’

Zainab laughed, though a hint of embarrassment crept into her expression.

‘I haven’t heard from you in a while,’ he said, studying her face.

Her eyes shifted away. ‘Oh, I’ve been busy... sort of.’

‘I see.’ He nodded.

She looked back at him. ‘Did you come to pick up something?’

‘Actually, I stopped by to take you out to lunch. I figured food might be a good way to get your attention.’

She laughed. ‘I was just heading out for lunch myself.’

Godson raised his eyebrows.

‘Well, now that’s what I call perfect timing. Maybe the universe is trying to tell us something.’

She laughed. ‘Maybe.’

‘And who are we to argue with the universe?’

‘You seem very willing to let the universe make your decisions for you.’

‘Only when it aligns with my instincts.’

She shook her head, smiling.

‘And what exactly are your instincts telling you?’

‘That taking you to lunch right now is a very good idea.’

She laughed.

They had barely taken a few steps when a courier approached, carrying a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a large, beautifully wrapped package in the other.

It was the courier’s fifth delivery to Zainab, so he already recognised her.

‘Delivery for you, ma’am.’

Her expression fell. Not again. How many times could she reject his gifts before the man finally got the message?

‘I don’t want them,’ she said firmly. ‘Please return them to the sender.’

The courier nodded. He had already delivered and collected three unwanted packages from her, so her reaction hardly surprised him.

‘All of them?’

‘Every single one.’

‘Okay, ma’am.’

He turned and walked away, the flowers and package still in his hands.

Godson watched him go, then looked back at Zainab. ‘Should I be asking questions?’

‘Nothing worth worrying about. Just someone who doesn’t understand the meaning of the word “no”.’

‘Good to know. Because I was beginning to think I’d walked into a very complicated lunch.’

She laughed.



THE RESTAURANT WAS elegant without being intimidating, with soft music playing in the background and enough distance between the tables to make conversation easy.

Godson had ordered a bottle of wine. When the waiter walked away, Zainab raised an eyebrow.

‘Wine?’

‘You don’t like wine?’

‘I do, but...’ She glanced at her watch. ‘It’s the middle of the day. I still have to go back to work.’

Godson smiled. ‘It’s one glass, Zainab. I promise it won’t turn you into a different person.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘Then make it half a glass.’

She laughed. ‘That defeats the purpose.’

‘I’m only asking you to relax and enjoy your lunch.’

She glanced at the bottle again, then at him.

‘One glass.’

‘Deal.’

‘And I’m going straight back to work afterwards.’

Godson raised his glass.

‘To responsible decisions.’

She laughed and clinked her glass against his.

‘You’re already a bad influence.’

‘I prefer to think of myself as a positive influence with questionable methods.’

Lunch turned out to be nothing like the polite meal she had expected.

They talked. They teased each other.

They argued playfully about whether pineapple belonged on pizza, whether expensive cars were worth the money, and whether anyone actually enjoyed business meetings.

At some point, Zainab realised she had been laughing so much that her cheeks hurt.



She couldn't remember the last time she'd had such an easy afternoon.

By the time the waiter cleared the plates, Zainab had already finished her second glass of wine.

She glanced at her phone.

Three missed calls from work.

'Oh no.'

'What?'

'I'm supposed to be back at work.'

Godson glanced at the nearly empty wine bottle.

'Are you sure that's a good idea?'

She looked at the bottle.

Then at him.

Then laughed.

'Probably not.'

'Good decision. Because I think your employees deserve a boss who can at least stand upright.'

She leaned back in her chair, shaking her head at Godson with an accusing smile.

‘You know,’ she said, ‘I had a perfectly respectable plan for today.’

Godson raised an eyebrow. ‘Really?’

‘Yes. I was going to have lunch, go back to my office, finish my work, and behave like a responsible adult.’

‘And instead?’

She lifted her wineglass and gave him a pointed look. ‘Instead, I ran into you.’

Godson laughed. ‘So now I’m responsible for your poor decisions?’

‘Absolutely.’ She took another sip. ‘You showed up at my workplace, kidnapped me at lunchtime, fed me, made me laugh all afternoon, and now you’ve got me drinking wine.’

‘I prefer to call it an intervention.’

‘An intervention?’

‘Yes. You looked like a woman who desperately needed to escape her office.’

Zainab laughed. ‘Well, congratulations. You’ve successfully ruined my afternoon.’

‘I’m beginning to think you enjoyed being ruined.’

She gave him a playful glare. ‘Careful. This is exactly what I mean. You’re a bad influence.’

Godson leaned back, grinning. ‘If one lunch has already turned me into a bad influence, imagine what could happen if I took you out on a proper date.’

Zainab paused, pretending to consider the proposal.

‘A proper date?’

‘Exactly. No workplace ambush. No pretending we’re just going for lunch. I pick you up. We have dinner somewhere nice. Maybe a little wine—although clearly I’ll have to supervise you.’

She laughed. 'Supervise me?'

'Absolutely. Someone has to make sure you don't get yourself into trouble.'

'Godson, you are the one who got me into trouble in the first place.'

'Then I suppose I should take responsibility.'

Zainab shook her head, smiling. 'You really don't give up, do you?'

'Not when I'm interested.'

For a moment, her teasing expression softened. She looked at him, then down at her wineglass before meeting his eyes again.

'Ok. I'll go on a proper date with you.'

'Just like that?'

'Don't look so shocked.'

'I'm not shocked. I'm trying to determine whether the wine is still talking.'

'It isn't.'

Godson smiled. 'Really?'

'Yes. But there's one condition.'

He leaned forward. 'What?'

'No turning up at my office and kidnapping me again.'

'Kidnapped you? You came willingly.'

'Under the influence of your bad influence.'

Godson grinned. 'I make no promises.'

She burst out laughing. 'See? Bad influence.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'But at least now you know what you're agreeing to.'

Zainab smiled across the table. 'I have a feeling I'm going to regret this.'

Godson raised his glass. 'Probably.'

She clinked hers against his.

'To bad decisions?'

‘To our first proper date.’

‘And to you behaving yourself.’

Godson took a slow, thoughtful sip of wine, his eyes never leaving hers.

‘I’ll behave,’ he said. ‘But I’m not sure you’re making it particularly easy.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh? And how exactly am I doing that?’

He smiled. ‘Looking at me like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like you’re already regretting telling me to behave.’

She laughed, but the faint colour rising in her cheeks betrayed her.

‘And Godson?’ al

‘Yes?’

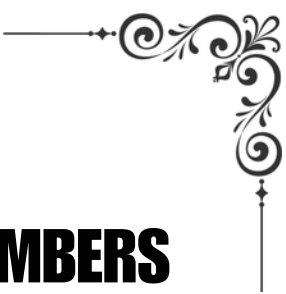
‘Next time, let me choose the wine.’

He glanced at his glass. ‘Deal. Although, judging by this conversation, I suspect the wine was never the dangerous part.’

She smiled. ‘Perhaps you’re finally catching on.’

He leaned back, his grin widening.

‘Good. I was beginning to worry I was the only one misbehaving.’



3

SMOULDERING EMBERS



Peter Matthews barely took notice of the passing scenery as his chauffeur navigated the familiar route. Engrossed in an article detailing the recent legal triumph of his counterpart, John Maduka, Peter's mood darkened.

The complex case had earned Maduka well-deserved praise, intensifying Peter's simmering envy. Besides, he drove this route daily on his way to work, so he didn't think there was any need to admire the scenery.

The Mercedes slowed and pulled up outside a sleek two-story building—his firm. His risk. His declaration of independence. He should have felt proud. Instead, satisfaction arrived tangled with comparison.

No matter how high he climbed, someone else always seemed to be applauded louder. He stepped out of the car, smoothing his jacket.

Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN).

The title opened doors. It brought a chauffeur, hourly fees touching five thousand naira, and retainers from the country's elite. Yet, despite the prestige, wealth, and influence, Peter found himself craving something even harder to attain—recognition. Public admiration mattered to him far more than he ever cared to admit.

Moreover, he reveled in substantial retainers as the legal counsel for several influential VIPs in Nigerian society, among them Clement Agwu, a long-time friend from university and the owner of one of Nigeria's largest supermarket chains.

The ties between Peter and Clement ran deep, rooted in their shared history and mutual success. He had been a second-year law student at the University of Lagos, late for a lecture, when raised voices pulled him off course.

Turning a corner, he saw Clement in a heated argument with a man straddling an okada. The rider gestured wildly, shouting in pidgin English. Clement stood his ground, jaw set, refusing to be intimidated.

A small crowd had gathered. Peter slowed, observing.

‘The ride from the main gate took less than a minute. Why are you trying to extort me?’

Clement’s irritation was plain on his face.

Peter stepped in.

‘Look,’ he said to the rider, keeping his voice calm, ‘you do this all the time. Is it because you see he’s a new student that you want to cheat him?’

The okada rider bristled.

‘Mister man, this no concern you. Mind your business. Abi I carry you?’

Then he turned back to Clement.

‘Oga, your money na five hundred naira.’ Peter felt heat rise in his chest.

It wasn’t just cheating—it was daylight robbery.



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That moment marked the beginning.

Two young men with ambition in their blood, already imagining futures larger than their circumstances.

Back in the present, Peter adjusted his cuffs and headed toward his office doors.

He had built something formidable.

Still, Maduka's name lingered in his mind. Peter didn't just want success.

He wanted to be untouchable.



FROM THAT DAY on, Peter and Clement became inseparable—studying together, encouraging each other, getting into trouble, dreaming out loud about the futures they intended to claim. They graduated around the same time: Clement finishing four years of Business Administration, Peter advancing through his Law degree.

But in their final year, the friendship was quietly tested.

They were walking across campus one afternoon when they passed a group of girls deep in conversation. Peter slowed.

He nodded toward one of them. 'That one. Tamara.'

Clement followed his gaze.

'I really like her,' Peter admitted. 'But I don't have the nerve to walk up to her.'

Clement smiled.

'If you like her, just go talk to her.' Peter shook his head.

'I'm terrible at that. Every time I think about approaching her, I back out. Besides, pulling one girl out of a group like that? That's a setup for public embarrassment.'

'They look friendly,' Clement said. Peter hesitated, then sighed. 'Would you mind talking to her for me? You're good with women. Just get her number. Tell her I like her.'

After a moment, Clement nodded. Peter stayed back, pretending not to care, watching as Clement walked up to the group.

The conversation looked effortless. Laughter followed. Within minutes, Clement had Tamara's number.

But even from a distance, Peter noticed something that tightened his chest.

When Clement gestured toward him, Tamara barely glanced his way. Instead, she smiled at Clement.

'Call me sometime,' she said.

Clement returned with a grin and handed Peter the paper.

'She's nice,' he said. 'You were right-Tamara.'

Peter thanked him, hopeful.

But when he finally worked up the courage to call her, reality landed hard.

'I'm sorry,' Tamara said. 'I'm not interested in you like that.'

'Oh,' Peter replied quietly, disappointment spreading through him.

Then she added brightly,

'But could you give me your friend's number? Clement, right?'

Peter closed his eyes. He gave her Clement's number anyway. The next day, he confronted him.

'Why did Tamara ask for your number when I called her?'

Clement looked genuinely surprised.

'She did?'

'She said she wasn't interested in me.'

'Oh.'

Peter studied him. 'What is it, Clement?'

Clement hesitated.

'Well... she actually told me she liked me. I didn't want to say anything. She also said you might've had a better chance if you'd approached her yourself.'

Peter felt heat rush to his face.

'So you went after her?' he snapped. 'After knowing how I felt? No wonder she was giggling while you were talking. Some friend you are.'

'That's not fair,' Clement said quickly.

‘I told her I wasn’t interested because you were. That’s why I gave you her number. If I wanted her, I wouldn’t have done that.’

Peter said nothing. He wanted to believe him, but something had shifted.

For the first time, it wasn’t about Tamara. It was about Clement—and the uncomfortable realization that Clement moved through the world with a confidence and ease Peter could never quite summon.

And for the first time, Peter felt the sting of comparison.

And that feeling stayed with him.

Peter told himself it didn’t matter.

Tamara was just a girl. Clement hadn’t technically done anything wrong.

Life moved on.

For the first time, Peter became aware of how easily Clement moved through the world—how people leaned toward him without effort, how opportunities seemed to orbit his confidence.

Clement spoke freely. Laughed loudly. Took risks without overthinking them.

Peter did everything carefully. Methodically. That difference began to bother him. It showed up in small ways at first.

Clement started missing classes to attend business seminars. He talked about supply chains and distributors while Peter buried himself deeper in case law and precedents.

Clement took internships with logistics firms. Peter stayed late at the library, memorizing statutes.

They were both ambitious.

But Clement was already building something tangible.

By graduation, Clement had lined up funding for a modest retail venture. Nothing flashy—just a single storefront near Surulere. Peter congratulated him, even helped draft the lease agreement.

Inside, he felt something twist.

Clement’s supermarket empire expanded with quiet precision—first one store, then another, then a third.

With each new venture, their meetings revealed a man evolving rapidly: bigger plans, stronger connections, and unstoppable momentum.



Peter, meanwhile, was still climbing the legal ladder—associate positions, long hours, courtroom losses that taught humility. He told himself law took time. That prestige came later.

Still, he noticed how people started referring to Clement with a different tone.

*Entrepreneur.

*Visionary.

*Boss.

Peter smiled when Clement spoke about expansion. He offered advice. He showed up to openings.

But privately, he began to measure himself against his friend. Not consciously.

Instinctively.

He replayed that moment with Tamara more than he cared to admit—the way she'd looked past him. The way Clement had been chosen without trying.

It taught Peter something important. Charm opens doors.

Confidence attracts loyalty.

And if you don't possess either naturally, you learn to compensate.

He compensated with discipline. With strategy.
With credentials.

He studied harder. Worked longer. Networked deliberately. He stopped waiting to be noticed and started positioning himself to be unavoidable.

Success, Peter decided, wasn't something you stumbled into. It was something you engineered.

Years later, when Peter finally earned his SAN title, when chauffeurs replaced bus rides and clients competed for his time, he told himself he had won.

Yet some part of him still tracked Clement's progress. Still counted.

Still compared.

That afternoon with Tamara had been small.

Forgettable.

Except it wasn't.

It was the first time Peter learned what it felt like to come second.

And he quietly vowed it would be the last.



IN THE YEARS that followed, Peter watched Clement and Tamara grow closer. What began as quiet resentment hardened into something bitter and permanent. They married. They built a family. Two beautiful children. Peter remained Clement's solicitor for more than twenty-five years.

Professionally loyal. Personally poisoned.

The envy never faded. Neither did the hatred—silent, festering, fed by the belief that Clement had taken the woman he loved. Clement, oblivious as ever, mistook longevity for loyalty.

Time healed nothing.

Peter stepped into the reception area of his firm and immediately spotted Victor Agwu—Clement's only son.

The space was bathed in soft pastel tones, chosen deliberately. Peter believed calm colors lowered defenses. A muted television played the news. Classical music drifted from hidden speakers. Everything here was engineered to soothe.

He jumped to his feet. 'Good morning, sir.'

Victor Agwu, sporting a long and bushy beard, stood at an imposing height of 6 feet 3 inches. His dark skin and lanky frame added to his distinctive presence. Towering a few inches above Peter, he easily caught sight of the bald spot on the crown of his head.

'Morning, son,' Peter said evenly. 'I didn't expect you. Come. My office.'

Following Peter up the familiar carpeted staircase, Victor was no stranger to the surroundings of the law office. His father had brought him to this building on multiple occasions. The well-trodden path to Peter's office was a testament to the longstanding professional relationship between Peter Matthews and Victor's father, Clement.

Reflecting Peter's personality, his office exuded formality to the point of being somewhat oppressive. Muted colours adorned the walls, complemented by a few carefully selected pieces of artwork. The focal point of the room was an imposing dark mahogany desk, where Peter conducted his legal affairs. Two chairs positioned in front of the desk provided a space for clients to sit and engage in conversations.

Peter's large leather swivel chair, resembling a throne, occupied a prominent position in the office. On a shelf opposite his desk and at the far end of the room, various law books and academic volumes were neatly arranged. A large picture of Peter in his legal wig and gown, as well as a smaller one of him in a three-piece suit, adorned the walls.

A notable characteristic of all these images was the absence of a smile on his face. The overall atmosphere in the office mirrored Peter's preference for a serious and formal demeanour. 'So, what can I do for you?' Peter asked as he settled into his chair.

‘As one of my father’s closest friends sir, there’s no one else I can turn to with my grievances. Living with my parents has become unbearable, and I’ve reached a breaking point because of what they’re doing to me. Frankly, I’m fed up with their oppressive behaviour.’

‘What are you talking about, Victor?’

He was well aware that Victor was a spoiled and entitled 27-year-old man-child, constantly mooching off his parents’ and refusing to take responsibility for his actions.

‘I’ve been cut off financially. My father made it clear that I won’t receive any more money from him, and I’m expected to start providing for myself. I’m also not allowed to drive any of the cars at home.

The most frustrating part is that my mother is now siding with him, which feels like the ultimate betrayal. She used to take my side, but now she just goes along with whatever he says. Honestly, I can’t take it anymore.’

‘What happened, Victor? Your parents wouldn’t just wake up one morning and cut you off. What did you do? Tell me the truth.’

‘Well, you know I dropped out of university because I had some issues with some cult members?’

‘Yes, I recall your father telling me something along those lines.’

Clement had mentioned to him that he had been tempted to cut Victor off financially when he dropped out of university. He said Victor had squandered his school fees on women, parties and gambling, but that Tamara had convinced him otherwise, arguing that not everyone was cut out for university.

‘A job would mould him into a more responsible young man,’ she had argued, attempting to persuade Clement to provide Victor with employment. Eventually, he agreed. Clement assigned him to oversee one branch of his chain of supermarkets. The hope was that giving him responsibilities would contribute to his character development.

Unfortunately, that approach proved futile as well.

‘He put me in charge of running the Surulere supermarket. ‘It was just a few minor bookkeeping issues,’ Victor scoffed.’ ‘Next thing I know, I’m fired. Cut off. Like I’m nothing.’ His face twisted. ‘I hate him. I hate both of them. I don’t know why I was cursed with such evil parents.’

In fact, Victor had run the business into the ground within six months, pocketing all the proceeds. By cooking the books, he also prevented his father from discovering his misdeeds until he was pursued by creditors.

After Victor destroyed the business, Tamara finally saw the light and stopped defending him. It was the final straw. When Clement cut Victor off financially, she did not object or try to intervene. Clement couldn’t bring himself to throw his son out of the family home, but neither could he bear having him under the same roof. With nowhere else to go, Victor moved into the guest house. The guest house offered the only compromise: Victor would have a place to live, but he would be kept at a distance.

‘I just wish these people would die so that I can have some semblance of peace,’ Victor fumed, pacing about the office.

Peter was taken aback by Victor’s last statement. He had been listening to Victor without giving him his full attention, but when Victor mentioned that he wanted his parents dead, his ears perked up.

‘Do you really mean what you just said?’ Peter asked quietly. In his head, various wheels were spinning. There was no answer from Victor, and Peter asked again, forcefully.

‘Are you serious about what you just said?’ He asked, standing up from his chair.

He walked up to Victor slowly, and Victor looked him dead in the eye and said, ‘I wish my parents were dead. I mean it.’

A slow smile spread across Peter’s face. Why hadn’t I thought of this before? he pondered.

As a skilled lawyer, he knew all the tricks in the book to get away with murder. He could have done away with Clement during all those years of suffering, watching him and Tamara grow in happiness.

Well, now I can get my revenge.

'You want your parents dead?' Peter asked Victor in clear terms, just to be sure.

'Yes. In fact, I want my sister dead too, so that I can be the sole heir to my father's wealth,' Victor replied boldly. He knew exactly what he wanted and wasn't ashamed admit it.

'There are ways to get what you want, if that is what you really want. But it will cost you,' Peter said finally. He was half-expecting Victor to back down, but the boy was adamant.

'Name your price.'

'It'll cost you 100,000 dollars, and you would have to pay half of the money before the job is done, and the other half after it's executed.'

'That's not a problem, but I want you to make sure my sister dies too, so that I remain the sole heir to all of my father's wealth.'

'I cannot agree to that. You don't have to harm Rita. She is my goddaughter, and I can help you without harming her.'

Compared to Victor, Rita was a gem. She inherited her mother's beauty and was the polar opposite of her brother. A twenty-one-year-old sociology undergraduate at the University of Ibadan, she exuded intelligence, humility, and responsibility. She was unquestionably Clement's favourite, and he often lamented that she had not been born a boy.

She was often bullied by Victor because he resented the love their father showered on her. When they were children, he made her cry as often as he could. He nicknamed her 'daddy's yellow fat cow', and once filled her bottle of soda with hot pepper sauce, laughing as he watched her suffer.

Rita still adored her only brother despite everything, and she often found herself wishing he would change.

In contrast, Victor had grown into a spoiled, entitled brat, shaped largely by his mother's relentless indulgence. As her only son, he was allowed to do virtually anything he pleased. Much of the blame for the man he became lay in her permissive parenting; constantly shielding him from the consequences of his actions, and often preventing Clement from disciplining him whenever he stepped out of line.

In one instance, Victor had been accused of violently assaulting a young girl. Upon learning about it, Tamara covered up the incident from her husband and paid off the girl's parents. All of it had played a part in shaping Victor into the man he had become, while his reckless choices and wayward lifestyle had driven a deep wedge between him and his father.

And here he is, trying to claim the entire inheritance for himself, Peter thought.

'Okay, here's what we will do,' Peter said after thinking up a way to exclude Rita from the plan. She did not deserve to die.

'We'll give Rita just two million naira and a small house in one of the shabby areas of Lagos, while you take the lion share of the inheritance. I can alter your father's will to this effect, and make it seem legitimate.'

Victor nodded in agreement. This was the perfect plan.

'All right, then. I'll know you're serious when you pay the fifty-thousand-dollar down payment,' Peter reminded him.

'No problem. I'll raise the money and transfer it to your account as soon as possible. I can't thank you enough for your help, sir,' Victor said excitedly. He left Peter's office in high spirits, convinced that everything was finally falling into place.

Peter watched Victor leave, wondering briefly whether he had gone too far. But the doubt soon faded.

Deep down, he believed Clement had brought this upon himself. It was simply karma catching up with him—and, as far as Peter was concerned, that was all there was to it.



Peter sat alone in the silence of his study, the amber glow from the desk lamp casting long shadows across the shelves of law books that lined the walls. A half-finished glass of whiskey rested beside him, untouched for several minutes as his thoughts spiraled deeper into darkness.

He pulled Clement's estate file from his secure cabinet and placed it on his desk. Slowly, methodically, he reviewed the documents—property holdings, trust structures, beneficiary designations.

He marked nothing. He changed nothing. Yet.

He was simply reminding himself what already belonged to him. Because that was how Peter saw it.

He had written Clement's contracts. Negotiated his acquisitions. Shielded him from lawsuits. Structured the empire that Victor had nearly destroyed. For twenty-five years, Peter had been the silent architect behind Clement's success.

It mattered every single day.

His jaw tightened.

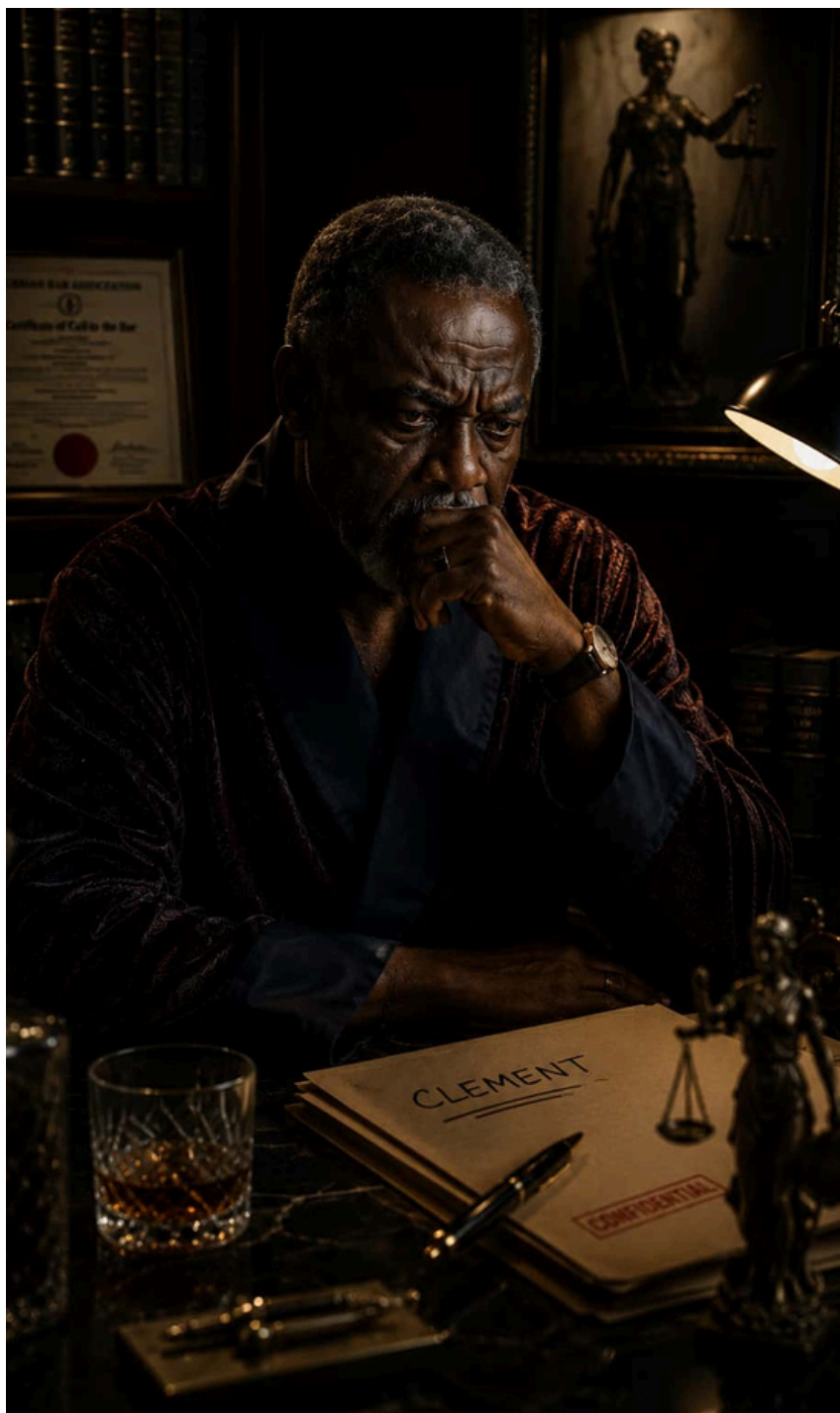
Clement had built the stores. Peter had built the protections. And Tamara?

Tamara had been the reward Peter never received. A familiar ache stirred in his chest.

Forty years, he thought bitterly. *Forty years of smiling in Clement's face while carrying this poison inside.*

He leaned back slowly, staring at the ceiling.

Tamara was supposed to be mine. Even after all these years, the thought still burned like acid in his chest.



And Peter had spent decades pretending it no longer mattered.
But it did.

I remained loyal to him. God knows I did. I stood beside him through every business problem, every family crisis, every stupid mistake his son made. And what did it get me? Front-row seats to the life I should have had.

Peter rose from his chair and walked toward the window, clasping his hands behind his back.

He justified it the way lawyers always do: in layers.

Victor had already crossed every moral line imaginable. This was simply allowing consequence to meet character.

Clement had failed as a father. Failed to protect Rita. Failed to see what his son had become.

Clement, the great disciplinarian, the successful patriarch, couldn't even keep control of his own household.

His son despised him. His family was fractured.

The cracks had been there for years;

Peter was merely allowing the inevitable to happen.

That was how he justified it to himself.

Victor's resentment had opened the door. Peter was only walking through it.

He exhaled heavily.

Besides... what kind of friend was Clement really?

A real friend would have seen what Tamara meant to me.

A real friend wouldn't have pursued her knowing how I felt.

But deep down, another voice whispered the truth he spent years trying to bury: Tamara had chosen Clement willingly.

Peter pushed the thought away immediately.

No.

He could not allow himself to think like that now.

Not tonight.

Because if he did, then he would have to admit that the bitterness consuming him was not really about betrayal.

It was about rejection.

And that truth was far more unbearable than the crime he was preparing to set in motion.

Peter wasn't creating tragedy. He was formalizing it.

And as for himself?

He was only facilitating inevitability.

That was the story he told himself.



ACROSS TOWN, TAMARA paused in the doorway of Clement's study.

She hadn't intended to snoop. She'd only come to bring him tea.

But something felt wrong.

Clement sat at his desk, shoulders slumped, staring at paperwork without turning pages.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

He looked up slowly. 'Yes,' he said. Too quickly.

Tamara stepped inside. 'You've been distant.'

Clement forced a smile. 'Just business stress.'



She studied him. After all these years, she knew his tells. The tight jaw. The way his fingers drummed lightly when he was worried.

‘And Victor?’ she asked. Clement exhaled.

‘He hasn’t called.’

That alone was unsettling.

Tamara felt a chill creep into her spine.

She set the cup down and placed a hand on Clement’s shoulder.

‘Promise me something,’ she said quietly.

He looked at her.

‘If Peter calls, tell me.’

Clement hesitated. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know,’ Tamara admitted. Something just feels... off. Maybe it’s just a woman’s intuition.’

Clement nodded, though he didn’t understand.

Tamara walked away with a knot in her stomach she couldn’t explain.



BACK IN HIS office, Peter returned to his chair and opened Victor’s file. He allowed himself one final moment of reflection.

He thought of Tamara’s laugh. Of Clement’s easy confidence.

Of the way life had unfolded for them while he built quietly in the background.

He remembered Tamara looking past him. He remembered Clement being chosen. He remembered twenty-five years of loyalty that had earned him nothing but proximity.

His mouth tightened. They were never grateful. He picked up his pen.

This wasn’t revenge. It was resolution. And Peter Matthews had always been very good at closing cases.



A WEEK LATER, Peter Matthews' phone vibrated with a bank alert.

Fifty thousand dollars. Victor had paid.

Peter didn't smile. He locked the screen and exhaled slowly, deliberately. The transfer confirmed what he already knew. Victor was committed.

They met the following Friday at exactly ten. Peter closed the office door. Drew the blinds.

By the time Victor left, the plan was set.

'Next Saturday the fifteenth,' Peter said evenly. 'Your parents will be traveling to Ibadan for a wedding. They always use the black Lexus.'

Victor nodded.

'I've arranged for a mechanic,' Peter continued. 'He'll tamper with the brake lines. The failure will occur once the car reaches highway speed.'

Victor frowned. 'What if the driver doesn't go that fast?' Peter didn't hesitate. 'He will. That road invites it.' He leaned forward. 'The main gate needs to be unlocked at three a.m. Friday. You'll leave the car accessible. I'll bring the mechanic myself. Thirty minutes. No more.'

Victor swallowed. 'And the gateman?'

'You sedate him Friday evening,' Peter said calmly. 'Just enough to keep him asleep.'

Victor hesitated again. 'This mechanic—can I trust him?'

Peter's lips curved faintly. 'You don't need to. He's disposable. I'll handle that afterward.' Silence settled between them.

Then Victor nodded.



AT 3 A.M. THE following Friday, Peter Matthews arrived with the mechanic.

The house slept.

The gate was open.

The job took twenty-eight minutes.

At six the following morning, Clement and Tamara Agwu left home, hoping to reach Ibadan early to help with wedding preparations for a close family friend.

They never arrived.

On the Lagos–Ibadan expressway, the brakes failed. The Lexus veered violently off the road and slammed into a tree with catastrophic force. Tamara wasn't wearing her seatbelt. The impact threw her forward into the airbag. She died instantly.

The driver was killed on impact.

Clement survived—but barely. He was rushed to St. Nicholas Hospital on Victoria Island in critical condition.

Peter Matthews read the report later that morning. He set his phone down. And for the first time in decades—He slept. Peacefully.



VICTOR DIDN'T CRY.

He didn't pray.

He closed the door of his guest room, locked it, and leaned his forehead against the wood until the shaking passed. Then he laughed. Soft at first. Disbelieving. Then louder, spilling out of him in short, breathless bursts.

It had worked.

He pulled the newspaper from his pocket and re-read the headlines, scrolling slowly, savoring each word.

Victor dropped onto the edge of the bed.

He kicked off his shoes and stretched out, staring at the ceiling like a man who had just survived a storm. For years he'd felt trapped in that house—lectured, monitored, cut off, treated like a liability instead of an heir. Now everything was finally shifting back into his favor

He imagined the estate. The accounts. The properties.
Freedom. He poured himself a stiff drink and raised the glass
toward the ceiling.

‘Finally,’ he whispered.

He didn’t toast his parents.

He toasted himself.



DAILY TIMES

NIGERIA INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER EST. 1926

TUESDAY, MAY 20, 2025 VOL. 101 NO. 36, 123 www.dailytimes.ng N250

NATIONAL ECONOMY
Inflation Eases Slightly to 22.6% in April - NBS
— PAGE 6



SPORTS
NPFL Playoffs: Enyimba Edge Closer to Title
— PAGE 32



SPORTS
NPFL Playoffs: Enyimba Edge Closer to Title
— PAGE 32



NEWS IN BRIEF
Bandits Abduct 14 in Katsina
Armed bandits have abducted no fewer than 14 persons in Daimusa Local Government Area of Katsina State.
— PAGE 4

TRAGEDY ON THE EXPRESSWAY

Fatal Crash on Lagos-Ibadan Expressway

- **Prominent Businessman's Wife Killed**
- **Driver Also Dead**
- **Husband in Critical Condition**

BY CHINEDU OKAFOR
A tragic auto crash on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway yesterday claimed the life of Mrs. Adenike Adeyemi, wife of renowned businessman and CEO of Westpoint Group, Chief Kola Adeyemi.
The incident, which occurred around 3:45 p.m. near the Kara Bridge area, also claimed the life of the driver, while Chief Adeyemi is currently battling for his life at a private hospital in Lagos.
CONTINUES ON PAGE 3



Chief Kola Adeyemi and late wife, Mrs. Adenike Adeyemi.

Lagos Unveils New Traffic Management Plan
The Lagos State Government has unveiled a new traffic management plan to ease congestion across the state.
— PAGE 5

CBN Retains Monetary Policy Rate at 24.75%
The Central Bank of Nigeria has retained the Monetary Policy Rate at 24.75 percent, citing persistent economic risks.
— PAGE 6

Drama in Court as Former Govt Official Faints
A former senior government official collapsed in court yesterday during his trial on alleged corruption charges.
— PAGE 9

Northern Governors Meet Security Chiefs, Seek More Support
BY BASHIR YUSUF
The Northern States Governors Forum yesterday met with service chiefs and heads of security agencies to discuss the worsening security situation in the region.
The governors appealed for increased military presence and better intelligence gathering to curb bandit kidnappings and
— PAGE 4

COMMENT
Fixing Nigeria Starts with Leadership
— PAGE 13



PETER MATTHEWS SLEPT for three hours.

Deep.

Uninterrupted.

Then jolted awake at exactly 3:00 AM, drenched in cold sweat.

When he surfaced, it wasn't panic that greeted him. It was clarity. He lay still, staring at the ceiling, listening to the hum of the air conditioner. His chest felt lighter, as if something that had been lodged there for decades had finally come loose.

He rose from the bed and made his way to the study.

He poured himself a stiff drink and stood by the window, gazing out over Lagos as the city stretched endlessly beneath him.

Clement would wake soon. If he woke at all.

Peter closed his eyes briefly.

He felt no triumph. No surge of victory. Only completion.

He told himself he hadn't killed anyone. He had merely aligned circumstances.

Their own son had wanted this. The mechanic had done the work. The road had done the rest. Peter had simply connected the dots.

That distinction mattered to him.

He moved quietly around the study, checking his phone, deleting old messages and clearing his browsing history. He wiped down surfaces that were already spotless and straightened things that were perfectly in place. It was the kind of restless, meticulous activity that betrayed how unsettled he really was.

Control, reasserted through ritual. He thought of Tamara. Not with longing. With distance.

She had been a chapter that never belonged to him. Clement had taken her, built a life, lived openly in ways Peter never had.

Now that life was broken. Balance restored.

He told himself Clement had failed as a father. Failed to restrain Victor. Failed to see the rot growing in his own house. Peter had intervened where Clement could not. That was the story he accepted.

He checked the news again. Still critical.

Good.

He poured another glass of whiskey and sat at his desk.
There would be documents to prepare.
Condolences to offer.
Legal pathways to manage.
A grieving daughter to protect.
An inheritance to restructure.
He would be indispensable.
As always.
Peter Matthews didn't feel like a murderer.
He felt like a man who had finally resolved an old case.
And somewhere beneath the calm, beneath the justifications
and quiet routines, a colder truth settled into place: he had crossed
a line.
And nothing inside him had pushed back.





4

A LOVELY DAY



Zubby's phone buzzed insistently on the bedside table.
Still half asleep, he reached over, squinting at the screen.
It was Genevieve.

He smiled before answering.

'Hey girl, good morning.'

'Zubby, I have good news.'

'What kind of good news?'

'The kind that's going to wipe that sleepy voice right off your face.'

'That sounds serious.'

The excitement bubbling in her voice jolted Zubby upright.
Any trace of sleep vanished in an instant. He was fully awake now.

'Have you heard of The Cool Guys?'

The one in Eko Atlantic City?

'The very one.'

His eyebrows rose, wondering where this was going.

'What about it?'

'Well,' she said, barely containing herself, 'my uncle is the CEO.'

'Really?'

Zubby's eyebrows shot up. 'That place is incredible.'

She nodded, grinning.

'Yes. He built it from scratch. He's my mum's younger brother, and we're very close.' She paused, her smile widening. 'I told him all about you.'



His smile faded slightly.

‘...About me?’

‘I told him what happened.’

‘The attack.’

‘You didn't have to—’

She interrupted him gently.

‘I had to. We’re very close. I couldn’t keep something like that from him.’

Silence.

‘I wasn't looking for recognition.’

‘I know.’

‘That's exactly what impressed him.’

He frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘He said...’ she paused, recalling his words, ‘Any young man willing to risk his life for someone he doesn’t even know is exactly the kind of person I'd trust with my business.’

Zubby was speechless.

‘He... said that?’

‘He did.’

Another pause.

‘And then...’

She couldn't contain herself anymore.

‘He wants to meet you.’

‘Meet me... for what?’

‘He wants to offer you a job, Zubby.’

Silence.

Genevieve checked the phone.

‘Zubby?’

‘...I'm here.’

‘Say something.’

‘I...’

He laughed nervously.

‘I don't know what to say.’

‘Try, thank you, Genevieve.’

He laughed again.

‘Thank you, Genevieve.’

‘You're welcome.’

Another pause.

He rubbed a hand over his face.

‘This doesn't feel real.’

‘It is.’

‘What kind of job?’

‘Sales.’

‘He says if you're half as decent in person as I described...’

She grinned. ‘...you'll fit right in.’

Zubby closed his eyes.

‘He'd really hire someone just because of what I did?’

‘No.’

She corrected him.

‘He wants to hire you because you’re more than just a good guy. I told him you graduated with a 2:1 in Economics and that you were on your way to an interview with Shell when you stopped to help me. That’s what impressed him the most.’

That landed differently.

Zubby stared out of the window.

For years he’d been filling in application after application, attending interviews, collecting polite rejection emails and promises that never materialised.

Now...

Someone wanted to give him a chance because of his character.

Not his CV.

Not his qualifications.

His character.

‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘You’ve already said that.’

‘I mean...’

His voice caught slightly.

‘I’ve been praying for an opportunity.’

Genevieve smiled to herself.

‘Maybe this is one.’

He exhaled slowly.

‘When does he want to meet me?’

‘Tomorrow morning at ten.’

‘So soon?’

‘Yeah.’

‘That’s not a problem, is it?’

Zubby laughed. ‘No, I’ll be there. I just didn’t expect to be attending a job interview this year, let alone tomorrow.’

‘It’s called Karma, Zubby,’ Genevieve said quietly.

Another comfortable silence settled between them.

Finally Genevieve spoke.

‘Oh... and one more thing.’

‘What?’

‘Try not to save anybody on the way there.’

Zubby laughed. ‘No promises. I seem to have a habit of being in the wrong place at the right time.’



THE COOL GUYS, located in the heart of Eko Atlantic City, was one of the most exclusive electronics stores in the world.

Zubby arrived early.

The store sat deep inside Eko Atlantic City, and getting anywhere near it felt less like entering a shopping complex and more like approaching a government facility.

The first checkpoint stopped him cold.

An armed guard stepped forward, palm raised.

‘ID.’

Zubby handed it over. The guard studied his face, then the card, then his face again before nodding to a colleague. His name was logged. His destination recorded.

Then came the search.

Zubby emptied his pockets. Phone. Wallet. Keys. He raised his arms while another guard patted him down methodically, checking his waistband, his ankles, even the inside of his jacket. A handheld scanner traced slow lines across his body.

Only then was he waved forward—straight into a camera flash.

His photo was taken at the gate.

No explanation. No smiles. Just procedure.

Beyond that point, a second set of gates waited, reinforced steel framed by concrete barriers.

More uniformed security stood watch, alert and unsmiling, their presence heavy enough to make Zubby instinctively straighten his posture.

Every movement was observed. Every step tracked.

He signed another register. His phone number was verified. A visitor badge was clipped to his lapel. Only after a radio confirmation crackled back through a walkie-talkie was the final barrier lifted.

As Zubby walked inside, he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd just passed through layers of invisible walls. Whatever The Cool Guys were protecting, they weren't taking chances.

And as he adjusted his suit and headed toward reception, one thought stayed with him: if this was the security just to attend an interview, working here clearly meant stepping into a tightly controlled world—one that didn't forgive mistakes.

Then he entered the store. And the world changed.

The harsh geometry of checkpoints and concrete gave way to polished marble floors and soft ambient lighting. Cool air brushed his skin. Giant LED screens glowed silently along the walls, looping pristine product visuals. Rows of gleaming smartphones, tablets, and laptops sat perfectly aligned on minimalist glass counters.

Everything inside was calm. Controlled. Beautiful.
A subtle scent of citrus and new electronics lingered in the air.

Soft instrumental music played overhead.

Sales associates moved gracefully between displays, dressed in crisp uniforms, smiling easily—like none of what he'd just passed through existed. The contrast was jarring.

Outside: weapons, scanners, hard eyes.

Inside: luxury, technology, serenity.

Zubby adjusted his suit and took a slow breath.

If the security felt like a warning, the interior felt like an invitation. And as he headed toward reception, one thought stayed with him: working here wouldn't just mean selling electronics. It meant stepping into a tightly controlled world one that wrapped danger in polish and power in elegance.

Despite the early hour, the store buzzed with activity. Salespeople dressed in light blue shirts with gold name badges gleaming—engaged customers from every corner of the world.

Zubby watched closely, studying how the staff approached customers, how they listened, explained, persuaded. He imagined himself doing the same—confident, composed, effective.

Then his phone rang again. ‘Hi, Genevieve.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m at the store, or should I say, superstore,’ he said, smiling.

‘Unbelievable. Even after watching videos, I wasn’t prepared for this.’

‘Are you wearing a suit?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I thought it was the right thing to do.’

She smiled, clearly pleased. ‘Good. My uncle will appreciate that. He’s my favorite uncle—I’m actually closer to him than I am to my parents.’

She hesitated briefly before adding with a soft laugh, ‘he even bought me my car as a graduation present.’

Zubby hesitated, then said quietly, ‘I’m not surprised... there’s something about you, Genevieve. Something that makes falling in love with you feel completely natural.’

On the other end of the line, Genevieve gasped. Her heart raced. ‘What did you just say?’

‘What did you hear?’ Zubby replied.

A pause. Long enough to ache.

‘I’m not sure,’ she said. ‘I need to hear it again.’

‘I said... I love you, Genevieve.’

The words hung between them.

‘Hello?’ Zubby asked gently. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m here,’ she said, breathless. ‘Just... processing.’

‘And?’

‘I love you too,’ she said. ‘And I’m genuinely happy. Since the day we met, you’ve been on my mind constantly.’

Zubby released a long breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

‘Me too.’

They didn’t hang up. They stayed there in the silence, phones warm in their hands, listening to each other breathe.

‘I should go,’ Zubby finally said. ‘I need to prepare for the interview.’

‘Okay, babe,’ she replied softly. ‘Good luck.’

‘Talk to you later.’



BEHIND HIS METICULOUSLY polished oak desk, Teddy Osufia greeted Zubby with a broad smile as he walked into the office.

‘Zubby, thank you so much for coming! How are you?’

‘I’m fine, sir. Thanks for having me.’

Standing at around 5ft 9 inches, Osufia sported a buzz cut that defied his 55 years, making him appear much younger. Like everyone else at the store, he was clad in a light blue button-down collar shirt and dark khaki pants.

His handshake exuded confidence, immediately putting Zubby at ease in his presence.

‘Genevieve told me everything you went through on her behalf. I am so grateful to you for choosing to go to her aid. She told me you were attacked at once by all three of those dreadful thugs?’

‘Yes sir, I was.’

‘She also told me you were on your way to an interview with Shell Oil when all of this happened. And it cost you a chance to get that job, correct?’

‘Yes sir, that is correct.’

‘I like you, Zubby. I am forever in your debt. You put yourself at great risk for someone you don’t even know. I’m sure Genevieve has mentioned how close we are.

Today, I’m going to pay you back for your humanity, and for your kindness. How do you like The Cool Guys?’

‘It is the most incredible place I have ever seen. I feel like I’m in a foreign country when I’m in the building sir.’

‘Well, as of Monday, you’ll be starting work here selling top of the line electronic equipment. Now, my top sales guy earns an average of 45,000 dollars a year.

If you maximize your time and your skills, you can earn up to 50,000 dollars a year or more.

We make gross sales of over 5 million dollars every week. We ship products all over the world. Just by answering the phone, you can get big orders from customers across the globe, including the Middle East, Europe and America. I will train you to become one of the most successful salespeople in this building.

Tomorrow is Thursday. Be here at 9 AM for the first day of training. There will be an induction with Zainab in HR. The process should take around two hours. Bring in your ID and CV for our records. Once you're done, you'll be meeting with me at 2 PM on Friday. Zainab will see you tomorrow at 9 AM sharp for your induction training.'



OSUFIA WELCOMED ZUBBY into his office at 2 PM on Friday with a handshake. 'Zubby, my boy—good to see you again.' A measured smile. 'Have a seat.'

He waited until Zubby sat before continuing. 'How are you?' 'I feel blessed to be here, sir.'

'Good.' A nod. 'You've completed all the training?'

'Yes, sir. I still have a great deal to learn, but I'm satisfied with how much I've learned so far.'

He studied Zubby for a moment, as though weighing him up. There was something about Zubby's attitude that suggested he would make an excellent employee—the kind of attitude that could not be taught.

'That answer matters,' he said. 'It tells me a lot about your attitude, your personality, and your sales instincts. More importantly, it tells me you're teachable.'

He paused, letting the words settle before continuing. 'Some people come in here thinking that watching a few videos makes them experts. People like that don't belong in sales. They don't last.'

He leaned forward, folding his hands.

‘Today isn’t about training. It’s about alignment.’

Another pause—longer.

‘My job is to introduce you to the art of selling. And make no mistake—selling is an art. One that rewards the disciplined and exposes the careless.’

He held Zubby’s gaze.

‘You’ve watched the videos. You know how critical product knowledge is. What you’re about to learn now is how that knowledge separates those who belong here... from those who don’t.

Let’s begin.’



‘Now listen carefully. I’m about to share techniques that can help you earn more money in Nigeria than you ever imagined possible. There is no ceiling on what you can make here. We have the customers. We have the merchandise. What we need are salespeople—not customer service staff. Sales staff. There is a difference, and it matters.’

He paused, letting the words sink in.

‘I started out as a sales associate in a world class electronics store in Los Angeles called The Good Guys over thirty years ago. I worked the floor. I chased commissions. I survived on performance alone. So trust me when I say—I know this business inside out.’

A faint smile.

‘I know every trick in the book. Cherry-picking customers. Poaching sales. Cutting corners. Nothing gets past me. I’ve done it all. And I’ve seen it all.

But first, let’s get into the name ‘The Cool Guys’. What do you suppose inspired us to choose such a name? What comes to your mind when you think about The Cool Guys?’

‘Well,’ Zubby replied with a shrug, ‘that we’re a cool store?’



A pause.

‘Exactly. It may sound like a simple idea, but that simplicity is at the heart of what we do: delivering cool products through people who are just as cool. Like I told you, our daily footfall over 24 hours exceeds 1000 visitors. Over 80 percent of our daily visitors buy something. We want everyone that steps in those doors to have an experience they will cherish. A top-of-the-line sales experience is what we strive for.

When customers think back on their experience with us—or talk about us on social media, we want those memories to feel cool. Effortless. Positive.’

He smiles, practiced.

‘Because when people talk, they don’t just talk. They broadcast. Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. TikTok. Anywhere they feel like telling our story for us.’

A pause. Long enough to feel intentional.

‘So let me be very clear. A substandard selling experience is a sackable offence.’

Another pause.

‘And by substandard, I don’t mean rude. I don’t mean unhelpful.’ He tilts his head slightly. ‘So—what do I mean?’

‘Not helping the customer get what they want?’ Zubby offers.

‘Exactly.’

A nod. Approval—measured.

‘Let me show you.’

He begins to pace, slow and deliberate, like he’s rehearsed this a hundred times.

‘A customer walks in. They browse our iPhones. They point at one and say, “*I want that.*” An associate retrieves it, rings them up, and the customer leaves.’

He stops pacing.

Silence.

‘Question. Did that sales associate do a good job?’

Zubby hesitates. The sales associate had clearly done his job, but there was a trap somewhere—one Zubby couldn't quite figure out. 'Um—'

'Um' isn't an answer, Zubby.'

A smile, thin. 'Yes or no.'

'Ah...Yes, sir.'

The smile widens just a fraction. 'That's the obvious answer. And its wrong.'

He steps closer now—not aggressive, just... present.

'The customer received customer service. What they did not receive was a sales experience. And this is not a customer service floor. It's a sales floor.'

A subtle emphasis.

'You don't hand someone a smartphone just because they point at it. That's not helpful—it's negligent. You've failed the customer. You've failed the business. And you've failed yourself.'

'A smartphone is capable of performing countless functions, yet most people use less than ten percent of what their phones are actually capable of.'

He lets that number settle.

'Not because they don't want more—but because no one shows them what more looks like.'

He looked directly at Zubby. 'That's where you come in.'

'You ask questions. What do they actually intend to use the phone for? Content creation? Photography? Video recording? Podcasting?'

He paused.

'Even if they're in a hurry, you don't rush the sale. You slow things down. You book an appointment. You take control of the process.'

Another pause.

'You guide them.' He straightens.

'This is why you must know everything we sell. Not just features—outcomes. How each product solves a problem they didn't even realize they had.'

A pause.

'Clear?'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good.’

He pivots smoothly. ‘Now—accessories.’ The word lands heavier. ‘No sale is complete without them. Phone margins are razor thin. Accessories are where value is created.’

He counts them off.

‘Case. Screen protector. Car mount. Tripod. Charger. External storage. Smartwatch.’

He looks around the room.

‘Most customers won’t ask for these. That’s not because they don’t need them. It’s because they don’t know better.’

Another pause.

‘That’s why you’re here.’

He stops pacing.

‘And now we arrive at the most important part of the sale.’

His voice lowers.

‘The real money makers. Extended warranties.’

Phones become obsolete in two to three years. You spend a thousand dollars today, and in three years it’s outdated. That’s not fear—that’s math.’

He leans forward slightly.

‘For an additional three hundred and forty-nine dollars, the customer protects that investment. Three years later, they receive a replacement—saving hundreds.’

He opens his hands.

‘We send the old device back. We’re compensated. Everyone benefits.’

A pause.

‘Sounds obvious.’

A faint shake of the head.

‘It’s not.’

‘Extended warranties are difficult—especially when a customer walks in with a fixed budget. But when you help them reframe the purchase, some of them understand.’

Another pause.

‘You’re not asking them to spend more.’

You're helping them avoid loss.'

He looks directly at Zubby.

'Convincing someone to exceed their original plan requires discipline. Patience. Skill.'

Then, almost offhand:

'They can also spread the payment over six months.'

A pause.

'The only drawback—for you—is that you receive your twenty-five percent commission only after the final payment clears.'

Silence.

'That,' he says calmly, 'is the difference between cashiers and sales professionals.'

Are you with me?'

'Yes sir, I am.'

'What do you think so far?'

'I am pumped up to be the best salesman on the floor, sir. I promise to make you proud and I am extremely grateful for providing me this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.'

'Good, good. I'm glad to hear that.'

So that's the foundation. You need to learn how to make fast sales. Time is money. The quicker you can qualify a customer and satisfy their needs, the more customers you serve—and the more money you make.'

He scans the room.

'You'll also need to learn how to juggle two or three customers at once, without any of them feeling ignored. That comes with experience.'

He turns to Zubby. 'Any questions?'

'Yes, sir. Just one. I've never sold anything before, so this will be new to me. What fundamental skills do I need to succeed on the floor?'

A smile.

'Good question, Zubby. I like your attitude. To succeed here, you need the eye of the tiger.'

‘First—product knowledge. It’s absolute and non-negotiable. You must understand what you’re selling well enough to match the right product to the right customer.’

He leaned forward slightly.

‘If you don’t, they’ll be back to return it. And when that happens, you lose trust. Worse—if you’re not on shift, someone else handles the exchange and your commission is gone.’

Second—rapport. Learn names. Get personal. Build a Rolodex of your customers. Give every customer your card. Let them know they can call you with questions—about their purchase or anything tech-related.’

He nodded.

‘Follow up. Check in. Make them feel remembered. Don’t treat them like customers—treat them like friends.’

A pause.

‘Third—attitude. You’ve got that already. You need drive. Hunger. The mindset to want to be the best. Like I said—eye of the tiger.’

He straightened.

‘And finally—energy. This is a big, busy store, with customers coming through the doors all day, every day. You need stamina. You need to stay physically and mentally sharp. You can’t afford to run out of steam halfway through a shift.’

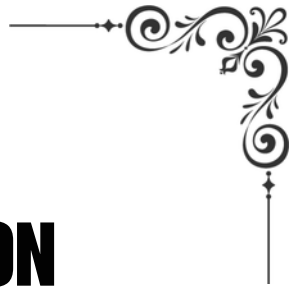
He looked at Zubby again. ‘Anything else?’

‘No, sir. Thank you for taking the time to explain all this. I really appreciate it. I promise you sir, your time hasn’t been wasted.’

‘You’re welcome, Zubby. I’ll be away on business for a couple of weeks starting Monday—but don’t get comfortable.’

A faint smile.

‘I see everything that happens in this store. Every minute of the day. So even when I’m gone... I’m still here.’



5

THE MISSION



Omotola and Yul had chosen a table at the back of the coffee shop, deliberately tucked away from the prying eyes—and, more importantly, the listening ears—of the other customers. Omotola crossed her long, shapely legs beneath the table, absently twisting a serviette between her fingers. Across from her, Yul stared silently through the window, his expression unreadable.

They had been waiting for Jim.

And they were still waiting.

Jim served as their indispensable info guy. Not only was he well-connected in the underworld, but, more importantly, they could wholeheartedly rely on him. They were on the lookout for a specific male—an unwitting pawn who could be easily manipulated. Jim, with cunning precision, had just the right individual in mind.'

Omotola threw her hair back and raised her eyes to the counter at the other end of the room. On cue, the barista pushed a tray onto the counter and shouted over the din of the coffee shop:

'Order 22!'

Yul went to get the order and just in time, Jim walked in. Good, because she wasn't about to have a conversation over cold coffee. He pumped fists with Yul, and nodded in greeting at Omotola before settling into the chair opposite them. After taking a slow sip of his coffee, he leaned back and lowered his voice.

'I know just the guy for you. He's a punk I've dealt with before. Trust me—he'll be perfect.'

‘Because he thinks he’s some kind of champion for women. He’ll be extremely easy for you to manipulate. Once you get him caught up, he’ll do anything you want him to. That’s his nature.’

‘Champion for women? He sounds kind of hot,’ Omotola remarked.

‘Who is he?’ Yul asked.

‘His name is Zubby. I don’t know his last name. Right now, he is dating some bitch I used to mess around with who thought too highly of herself. At the end of the day, she was just playing me.’



Omotola leaned forward, placing her elbow on the table and her jaw in her right palm. Stories like these intrigued her.

Jim continued. ‘One day I got sick of her bullshit and I decided to give her a thorough beating. I wanted to teach her a lesson and let her know her place. Then, this fool appeared from nowhere and got his ass involved. He was like, “You don’t hit women”. I called Ice and Doom, and the three of us gave him the beating of his life.’

‘The funny thing is, instead of running away, the fool decided to take on all three of us at once. He’s working as a salesman for an electronics store in Eko Atlantic City. From what you’ve told me you’re looking for, I’d say he’s ideal.’

‘He took on all three of you at the same time?’ Taking a sip of her coffee, she said, ‘that’s fascinating!’

‘Is there anything else you know about him?’ Yul asked.

‘Um, I don’t know much else about him at all to be honest. Nothing happened after the beating, so I believe he comes from a wretched background. If he was anybody, the police would have come looking for me because we beat him within an inch of his life. I thought we killed the motherfucker, to be honest. But from what I know of him, he’s the perfect guy for what you’re looking for. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind.’

Jim nodded his head and straightened, his expression straight and resolute.

‘That’s what I call a real man,’ Omotola murmured, taking another sip of her drink.

‘What’s the deal?’ Yul asked her, eyeing her suspiciously. ‘You sound like you’re a fan of this fella.’

‘Maybe I just find his story fascinating. He put himself in harm’s way to protect a woman. That takes courage. Some people might even call him a hero,’ Omotola retorted, pinning her gaze on Yul. She didn’t like the stormy look in his eyes.

‘Hero my ass. You find some punk that ruined my relationship interesting?’ Jim asked.

She laughed. ‘Well, he fought the three of you and still got the girl. For me, that’s a turn on in my books.’

‘Turn on? Sounds to me like someone is looking to get laid,’ Jim said, sarcasm lacing his tone. ‘Yul, are you listening to this? Tell Omotola she needs to relax.’

She shot him a look.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, Jim. Did I hurt your feelings?’ she asked, feigning concern. A wicked smile tugged at the corner of her lips. ‘Well, let me ask you something. Why didn’t you face off against this ‘punk’ one-on-one? Why did you have to call Ice and Doom to do your dirty work? What happened to all that bravado? Was he too big and too strong?’

She paused, looking him up and down with deliberate amusement.

‘Or perhaps you suddenly discovered that courage is easier to find when you’ve got two thugs standing behind you.’

Jim glared at her, ready to protest, but one look at Yul made the words shrivel in his throat.

For once, he had no comeback.

He conceded defeat.

‘I’m sorry. I just really hate the guy.’

‘No shit!’ Omotola quipped, rolling her eyes. ‘We’d never have guessed.’